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# Comic strips as a multimodal teaching tool to promote literacies

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Relatório realizado no âmbito do Mestrado em Ensino do Inglês no 3º Ciclo do Ensino Básico e Ensino Secundário, orientado pela Professora Doutora Maria Ellison e coorientado pelo Professor Doutor Nicolas Hurst.

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Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto

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[Porto, novembro de 2018]

[Ema Sofia Silva Oliveira]

# Contents

Acknowledgments .....	8
Abstract .....	9
Resumo.....	10
List of figures and tables .....	11
Introduction .....	12
I. Rationale .....	17
1.1. School context.....	17
1.2. Class Profile .....	18
1.3. Zero Cycle of Action Research: Identification of the problem .....	19
1.3.1. Lesson observations .....	19
1.3.2. First taught units.....	22
II. Theoretical background .....	26
2.1. Multimodality: semiotic texts in the age of technology and globalisation .....	26
2.2. Literacy: from traditional literacy to new literacies .....	29
2.2.1. Digital literacy: incorporating technology into the classroom .....	32
2.2.2. Critical literacy: helping our students take action in society .....	35
2.2.3. Visual Literacy: learning to see .....	38
2.2.4. Print literacy: reading and writing can be communicative.....	41
2.3. Comic strips as multimodal texts in the promotion of literacies.....	45
2.3.1. Definitions and characteristics of comic strips as multimodal texts .....	45
2.3.2. Promoting literacies through speech in comic strips.....	47
2.3.3. Promoting literacies through the use of illustrations in comic strips .....	50
2.3.4. Promoting literacy through the analysis and creation of content in comic strips .....	52
III. Design of the study.....	56
3.1. Plan of Action.....	56
3.2. Methodology .....	59
III. First Cycle of the Action Research Project .....	66
3.1. Contextualization of the activities .....	66
3.2. Description of the activities.....	68
3.3. Results .....	70
3.4. Interpretation of the results .....	76
3.4.1 Activity 1.2. ....	76

3.4.2. Activity 1.2.....	78
3.4.3. Activity 1.3.....	80
3.4.4. Activity 1.4.....	81
3.4.5. Questionnaires.....	82
IV. Second Cycle of Action Research Project.....	85
5.1.Contextualization of the activities.....	86
5.2. Description of activities.....	88
5.3. Results.....	90
5.4. Interpretation of the results.....	94
5.4.1. Activity 2.1.....	94
5.4.2. Activity 2.2.....	97
5.4.3. Activity 2.3.....	99
5.4.4. Questionnaires.....	102
Conclusions.....	104
Limitations.....	108
Future lines of study.....	110
References:.....	112
Appendices.....	117

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## **Abstract**

Preparing students to function linguistically in a fast-evolving world in which the communication landscape becomes increasingly more complex is of paramount importance and thereby, new notions of what it means to be a proficient communicator emerge. In the age of digitalisation, messages are encoded and decoded, sent and received in multimodal ways. On our computer screens, the verbal realm of meaning-making seldom operates alone, as movement, image and sound add to the representational process, thus reconceptualising old notions of literacy and their foregrounding of the written text. In fact, nowadays, a truly literate person must be capable of producing and analysing a wide range of paper-based and digital texts. This new concept of what it means to be literate has spilled over into English Language Teaching classrooms and there have been attempts to build on the types of literacies that our students use daily, and to help them become critical consumers of multimodal texts. It is imperative to raise students' awareness of the ways in which the semiotic resources of multimodal texts convey meaning. Now more than ever, visual interpretation skills, critical thinking, digital competences and reading comprehension converge and lay the basis for what it means to be multiliterate. In this context, the main aim of this action research project was to promote different types of literacy skills through the analysis and the creation of comic strips as multimodal teaching tools, drawing on the notion that this type of material may be approached in complex and enriching ways if we consider all types of meaning-making components present in comic strips. The purpose of this study was to discern the effectiveness of the use of this type of multimodal text and results showed a significant improvement with regard to multimodal literacies for a 10<sup>th</sup> grade class of Portuguese students in the English language classroom.

**Key words:** multimodality, critical literacy, digital literacy, visual literacy, print literacies

## Resumo

Preparar os alunos para funcionarem linguisticamente num mundo em rápida evolução, no qual os sistemas de comunicação se tornam cada vez mais complexos, é de suma importância e, neste contexto, novas noções do que significa ser um comunicador proficiente emergem. Na era da digitalização, as mensagens são codificadas e decodificadas, enviadas e recebidas de maneira multimodal. Nos nossos ecrãs do computador, o domínio verbal da criação de significado raramente opera sozinho, à medida que movimento, imagem e som se somam ao processo representacional, reconceitualizando assim velhas noções de literacia e ênfase no texto escrito. De fato, hoje em dia, uma pessoa verdadeiramente alfabetizada deve ser capaz de produzir e analisar um leque variado de textos em papel e digitais. Esse novo conceito de literacia foi transportado para as salas de aula do Ensino de Inglês e têm existido tentativas de desenvolver os tipos de literacia que os nossos alunos usam diariamente e de ajudá-los a se tornarem consumidores críticos de textos multimodais. É imperativo consciencializar os estudantes acerca das maneiras pelas quais os recursos semióticos dos textos multimodais transmitem significado. Agora, mais do que nunca, as aptitudes de interpretação visual, pensamento crítico, competências digitais e compreensão de leitura convergem e estabelecem as bases para o que significa ser multiliterado. Neste contexto, o principal objetivo deste projeto de investigação-ação foi promover diferentes tipos de competências de literacia através da análise e criação de bandas desenhadas como ferramentas de ensino multimodais, baseando-se na noção de que este tipo de material pode ser abordado de forma complexa e enriquecedora, se considerarmos todos os tipos de componentes de criação de significado presentes nas bandas desenhadas. O objetivo deste estudo foi discernir a eficácia da utilização deste tipo de texto multimodal e os resultados mostraram uma melhoria significativa no que diz respeito às literacias multimodais de uma turma do 10º ano de estudantes portugueses da língua inglesa.

**Palavras-chave:** multimodalidade, literacia visual, literacia digital, literacia crítica

## List of figures and tables

### Figures

Figure 1: Teacher-made comic strip with added dialogue by the students.....	72
Figure 2: Comic strip created by students in activity 1.4.....	72
Figure 3: Teacher-made comic strip with added dialogue by Group 1.....	87
Figure 4: Teacher-made comic strip with added dialogue by Group 2.....	87
Figure 5: Teacher-made comic strip with added dialogue by Group 3.....	88
Figure 6: Comic strip created by Group 1 in activity 2.2.....	88
Figure 7: Comic strip created by Group 2 in activity 2.2.....	89
Figure 8: Comic strip created by Group 3 in activity 2.2.....	89
Figure 9: Comic strip created by Group 1 in activity 2.3.....	90
Figure 10: Comic strip created by Group 2 in activity 2.3.....	90
Figure 11: Comic strip created by Group 3 in activity 2.3.....	90

### Tables:

Table 1: Criteria used to assess students' work based on Biggs and Collis's (1982) SOLO taxonomy.....	53
Table 2: Transcription of class discussion carried out in activity 1.1.....	67
Table 3: Transcription of class discussion carried in activity 1.2.....	69

## Introduction

Literacy is a platform for democratization, and a vehicle for the promotion of cultural and national identity. For everyone, everywhere, literacy is, along with education in general, a basic human right.... Literacy is, finally, the road to human progress and the means through which every man, woman and child can realize his or her full potential.

Kofi Annan, Former Secretary-General of the United Nations, press release on occasion of International Literacy Day (1997).

Firstly, I will present a brief overview of the evolution of the notion of ‘literacy’, discussing some of the main turning points which have shaped the way in which we view this construct. Prior to the 1970s, literacy was understood as a mere set of technical skills. In this context, the main focus of literacy was “teaching pupils how to decode, encode and comprehend printed alphabetic texts” (Lankshear and Knobel, 2011, p.3). The aim was to provide as many people as possible with these types of technical skills, but little to no attention was given to the methods used for their provision. Moreover, the term was mainly used to refer to adults who could not read or write and were, therefore, considered illiterate. As mentioned by Lankshear and Knobel (2011), “‘literacy’ was the name given to programmes of nonformal instruction (...) that were offered to illiterate adults to help them acquire basic abilities to read and write” (p.4). In fact, efforts were made in order to eradicate illiteracy among adults, but they were not fruitful, as “literacy cannot be sustained by short-term operations or by top-down and unisectoral actions primarily directed towards the acquisition of technical skills” (UNESCO, 2004, p.5).

It was during the period from the early 1960s to the early 1990s that the concept of literacy expanded beyond the acquisition of technical skills due to a series of different reasons, which shook the foundations of the education system. Firstly, during the 1960s and 1970s, there was a heightened awareness of “the ways in which literacy is linked with socio-economic development” (UNESCO, 2004, p. 9). For this reason, new sets of skills, which affected productivity, were taken into consideration, such as arithmetical skills. For instance, in 1974, UNESCO and the United Nations conducted the Experimental World Literacy Programme (EWLP) with the objective of studying “the mutual relations and influences which exist or may be established or strengthened between literacy

training and development” (UNESCO, 1974, p.1). Although this view was rather limited, it still led the concept of literacy to broaden and consist of more than just the technical skills of reading and writing.

Another impactful landmark in the radical education movement was the rise to prominence of Paulo Freire’s controversial work in 1968 with his most celebrated book “Pedagogy of the oppressed”. Freire set the groundwork for the inclusion of critical thinking in the concept of literacy, going beyond the technical and socioeconomic confines of traditional views. According to him, education was a construct which could empower and disempower people, leading them toward liberation or perpetuating situations of oppression, thus assuming political and ethical connotations. Literacy, according to Freire and Macedo (1987), should be considered “a radical construct (...) rooted in a spirit of critique and project of possibility” that enables “people to participate in the understanding and transformation of their society” (p.2). Being literate began being consonant with critical consciousness of the world. Through education and literacy, one was able to take action and bring change, drawing on the notion that knowledge is power. Thus, “learning how to encode and decode alphabetic print was integrated into an expansive pedagogy in which groups of learners collaboratively pursued critical consciousness of their world” (Lankshear and Knobel, 2011, p. 5).

After Freire broke the confines of what it meant to be literate and raised awareness of the ways in which literacy impacts the political and social structures of our society, the concept of literacy has never remained stagnant and continued to evolve. Particularly in the last decade, there has been a growing shift in what it means to truly be literate. These changes “are associated with larger changes in technology, institutions, media and the economy” (Lankshear and Knobel, 2011, p. 28). In the age of digitalisation, screen-based technologies make use of numerous semiotic resources in the process of meaning-making, leading to a reconfiguration of how we decode and encode messages (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). The increasingly semiotic nature of the texts we are exposed to has called for a change in teaching and there has been a growing need to expand the parameters of language learning beyond the linguistic domain as to build upon the new types of literacy skills that students use on a daily basis. Learners have become consumers and creators of semiotic texts, partaking in the “production and exchange of multimodal

forms of texts that can arrive via digital code as sound, text, images, video, animations, and any combination of these”. (Lankshear and Knobel, 2011, p. 28). In light of this, it is of paramount importance to embrace these new sets of skills and modes for the purpose of developing a culture of possibilities which expand on the foregrounding of the written text.

Now we may ask ourselves whether these changes in the ways we make meaning have changed the communication landscape. The answer is, “yes”. The new processes of meaning-making have shaped the ways in which we interact with the world and the fact that meaning happens in so many different realms, especially in the digital sphere, requires us to produce and interpret messages in more complex manners.

Moreover, the phenomenon of globalisation has also contributed to the current shifts in the communication landscape. In fact, the choices we make to convey meaning are very much contextual and cultural. Thus, as we live in a cross-cultural environment, people and their different ways of communicating have converged (Fairclough, 2000).

This has also brought about changes in the English Language Teaching (ELT) classroom. As language teachers, our aim is to teach our students to communicate efficiently. Therefore, we must adapt to the current communication landscape, as it does not suffice to focus on the structural components of the language. In this context, a new approach on language learning has emerged, which provides learners with the social and cognitive problem-solving skills that they need to function in a fast-evolving society and encompasses “intellectual knowledge, learning skills, interpersonal development and intercultural sensitivities fostered in the language classroom” (Nunan, 2013, p.66).

In fact, if we consult the *Programa de Inglês nível continuação 10º, 11º e 12º*, its contents are clearly in accordance with this growing need to develop new types of literacy skills, as it states:

A aprendizagem de línguas inscreve-se num processo mais vasto, que ultrapassa a mera competência linguística, englobando aspectos ligados ao desenvolvimento pessoal e social dos alunos, levando-os a construir a sua identidade através do contacto com outras línguas e culturas. Aprender línguas favorece o desenvolvimento de uma postura questionante, analítica e crítica, face à realidade, concorrendo para a formação de cidadãos activos, intervenientes e autónomos (Moreira, Moreira, Roberto, Howcroft & Almeida, 2001, p. 2).

In this context and with the purpose of developing these new types of skills, which our students need in order to be proficient communicators, a “nuanced convergence and coherence of experiences and skills that inform meaning making” (Abrams, 2015) must be employed. The aims of this Action Research Project are concurrent with the growing need to promote literacies required for the production and interpretation of semiotic resources, through the use of comic strips as pedagogical tools (see section 1.3.).

I will proceed with a brief overview of the organizational structure of this report. In chapter I, the focus of this investigation will be defined, thereby a profile of the class in which this action research project was employed will be presented. Afterwards, there will be an analysis of the results of the data collected through lesson observations and the first taught units with the aim of identifying a problem which needs to be addressed. This will lead to the proposal of a strategy aimed at improving this problem and the formulation of an action research question.

In chapter II, I will identify theoretical perspectives related to the focus of this project. I will be discussing the rise to prominence of the concepts of multimodality and multiliteracies in the context of digitisation and globalisation, as “forms of cognition, possibilities for learning, new shapings of knowledge, the management of information, and the shaping of forms of human subjectivity” (Kress & Leeuwen, 2001, p.127) in a world where “textual objects—spoken, signed, written, drawn—always occur in a multiplicity of modes” (Kress, 2000, p. 196). I will then scrutinize the potentials of comic strips as multimodal pedagogical tools which combine visual, textual, spatial, gestural and even aural modes to convey meaning in the development of different types of literacies (Jacobs, 2013).

Chapter III will provide information on the design of the study with regard to the types of data collection tools I used to discern the effectiveness the implementation of this project and to address the action research question. Consequently, in chapters IV and V, I will summarize and describe the activities employed, the context in which they were carried out and the results achieved in the first and second cycle respectively. I will thereupon develop my findings, by analyzing and making interpretations of the data with the aim of answering my research question.

Finally, I will present my conclusions on the implementation of this project, reflecting on the whole process with regard to my teaching practice and on the effectiveness of the strategy employed. Moreover, I will attempt to find patterns and establish connections between my findings from both cycles.



## I. Rationale

This chapter aims to describe the starting point of this action research. In this context, a brief description of the school in which this study was conducted will be provided as well as a profile of the class of students who were the participants in this study. Lastly, the problem that served as the stimulus for this project will be identified with evidence from data collected which will lead to the presentation of the research question.

### 1.1. School context

The school cluster Aurélia de Sousa was created on 4<sup>th</sup> July 2012, joining the school cluster Augusto Gil and Aurélia de Sousa Secondary School, in which the following study took place.

Aurélia de Sousa Secondary School is a school guided by the principles stated in the Portuguese Constitution and the *Lei de Bases do Sistema Educativo*. In this context, its main objectives are: to integrate the school in the community; promote democratic thinking and experiences; and respect the rules of democracy and representativeness in its management. It is evident that the participation of all individuals in the educational process is ensured and consequently all students seem to be aware of the fact that their opinions are valued, hence their opinionated nature, a characteristic that appears to be common to most students in this school. Additionally, students are also provided with creative freedom and are eager to showcase this competence. These aspects were all taken into account in the process of this study, as it is important to use some of these student strengths to solve their problems.

It is also important to mention that the school cluster *Aurélia de Sousa* has an “improvement plan” that has been active since 2015 and will continue up until 2018. The goals and main points of this plan are to reflect on students' results in order to create a strategy for their improvement. In order to achieve positive outcomes, the school intends to carry out activities that enrich the curriculum and the cultural awareness of students, thus promoting their education as well as providing the necessary conditions to develop

student exchange programs and receive foreign students. It is clear that the school attaches great importance on fostering cultural awareness and tolerance and this translates into the students' ability to function in cross-cultural situations and show empathy toward those who have different cultural backgrounds. Students are culturally aware and able to discuss a variety of different issues with maturity and common sense. These skills are essential in the English Language Teaching Classroom as language and culture are entwined (Byram, 1997) and students seem to be aware of this fact and I was able to work with this.

Another very important aspect that I found especially advantageous in the classroom was the fact that instead of 90 minute classes, students have two 50 minute classes with a break in between. This prevents students from becoming too tired after sitting for a long period of time. It is evident that when students return for the second part of the class, they are visibly reinvigorated and able to be more focused. It also benefited my plans in the sense that I was able to move students from a normal classroom into a computer room during breaks. Thus, the students were not forced to spend too much time in the small computer rooms, where it is hard to manage the class and learners are not provided with the conditions or space to carry out individual activities.

In terms of the school premises, they are of high quality and in excellent condition. Every classroom is equipped with an interactive board and, additionally, the school has four computer rooms, which were essential for the employment of my plan. However, all these rooms are frequently occupied and it can be difficult to find a time for a class.

## **1.2. Class Profile**

At beginning of the school year, I was assigned two different classes: one ninth year and one tenth year. The class chosen for this study was the latter and the decision was made mainly based on the time I had available to put the plan for this project into action and the characteristics of the class, a matter that will be discussed in more detail in a later chapter.

The tenth year class, who participated in this study, comprises twenty-five students in the area of Engineering. Considering how important it is to achieve high results in this field of study, it is clear that students are extremely ambitious and hard-working, as they

aspire to achieve the highest grades possible in order to be accepted into the best universities. In terms of behaviour, they are organized and orderly. However, they are eager to participate in class and are quick to voice their opinions. They are also extremely creative and enthusiastic and when given the opportunity to channel those qualities into something productive, the outcome is fantastic.

The study group is, by and large, rather homogeneous, as most students are at ease with the English language and possess good communicative skills. With regard to their assessment, in the first term of the school year of 2017/2018, only three students scored grades below ten, on a scale from one to twenty. In general, grades ranged from eight to eighteen, the average being approximately fifteen.

### **1.3. Zero Cycle of Action Research: Identification of the problem**

#### **1.3.1. Lesson observations**

My observations took place during the month of October before the start of my teaching practicum. I was able to gather a fair amount of information through my observations which helped me shape my own teaching and identify the characteristics of each class. This is clearly an essential stage of any Action Research as a project of this nature is characterized by its emergent nature, in the sense that “researchers enter the research process with a completely open mind and without setting out to test preconceived hypotheses” (Dörnyei, 2007, p.37). In light of this, it is through observation that I was able to reach conclusions which set the groundwork for the rest of the study. Thus, the problem I intended to work on emerged from the data I gathered rather than being a predetermined idea. These observations were recorded in two different manners and used for the purpose of this project: my researcher diary (which included notes I took in the course of the lessons I observed and during discussions with my mentor) as well as observation tasks which were provided by Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto (FLUP) and completed by me while observing lessons.

I will now discuss the most relevant aspects that I detected throughout the observation process. Firstly, it was evident from the very beginning that this group of

students had achieved a level of proficiency in the English language that was very high for their age (fourteen to sixteen years old). Moreover, they proved to be culturally and socially aware and well-informed about a variety of different topics. In the first lesson I observed, they were asked to present themselves in a brief written text. During these presentations I took notes with regard to their strengths and weaknesses and I found that in twenty-five students, only one seemed to struggle more evidently with the language. They were particularly fluent when speaking about topics they were passionate about, such as hobbies, TV shows, video games and other interests unrelated to school. When speaking about these topics, their stance became more confident and their overall performance improved. For instance, in one case in particular, a student showed some problems with verb tenses and sentence structure as he spoke about some aspects such as his age, field of study and his life in school. He then proceeded to discuss his interests, more specifically video games, and not only did he exhibit more confidence, dynamism and comfort but he also performed better linguistically and language mistakes became significantly less common in his speech.

Taking into account the linguistic proficiency of these students, it was clear that they needed a high degree of challenge. For this reason, I noticed in the following lessons I observed that my mentor ensured that these students were being challenged. She combined exercises that demanded more focus and work from the learners with activities that were more dynamic and less demanding. When discussing her techniques, she clarified that she carries out “stir up” and “calm down” activities. In other words, she tried to find a balance between activities that are dynamic and fun (such as watching videos, doing role-plays, discussions...) and activities that are calming and demand more concentration (reading comprehension exercises, writing activities...). However important this balance between both this type of activities was, students were normally more interested in performing more dynamic tasks and when instructed to do activities which required them to calm down and concentrate, their interest decreased.

In fact, I completed an observation task (Appendix 1) regarding one of the most challenging tasks which students performed. This activity was related to the analysis of graphics. They were instructed to read a graphic and complete a text with the information they had gathered from their analysis. It was evident that these exercises were necessary,

meaningful and extremely challenging for the students but, as expected, not only did they not enjoy the work but most were misinterpreting the data provided by the graphics, which was conspicuous while checking answers. They often misread the data and were not able to finish the activity on time. In fact, I believe the graphic was not the source of students' difficulties but the fact that they were required to read the graphics and then interpret a text as well. Making connections between these two completely different types of material was a challenge for them. It required them to use visual interpretation skills as well as reading comprehension skills and establish a link between both competences, connecting them to a whole as well as using the appropriate language to express their thoughts. In this type of activity the representational process is more complex as it encompasses two different types of meaning-making components and "constitutes comprehension and integration of information provided by different representational modalities, namely graphical elements and verbal constituents" (Acarturk & Cagiltay, 2008, p.335). My mentor was aware of how much students struggle with this type of activity and for this reason she allowed them to perform the task in pairs, which was extremely beneficial and provided them with the motivational factor of collaborating with their classmate. Even so, students were extremely insecure while performing the task and this was visible as they seemed to never truly be sure about what they were writing and kept going back to the graphics to double-check. They would also get really frustrated when their answers were wrong and I heard numerous interjections and some exasperated sighs from the student who was sitting beside me. In fact, even after they had been given the answers, they kept going back, trying to understand what they had done wrong, which shows how this group of students is so eager to learn, never giving up even when given the answers.

Needless to say, this lesson surprised me a great deal, as the graphics seemed reasonably easy to read and the language in the text was in line with their level. I concluded that students were not used to connecting information in this manner and it is very rare for an activity in their coursebooks to combine two different modes of meaning-making in a challenging manner.

### 1.3.2. First taught units

Upon reflecting on my observations, an assumption emerged. Students had mastered the language and were excellent in all domains but they struggled to combine different types of skills. They were also not particularly motivated to do so and were more interested in dynamic activities. However, it was of paramount importance that these students learn how to develop different types of skills and competences and learn to establish connections between them.

In order to corroborate my assumption, I employed several different activities. For instance, in my first taught unit to the tenth grade, on 22<sup>nd</sup> November, I chose to end the lesson with an activity from the coursebook, in which students were instructed to write a comment on a discussion forum giving their opinion on why learning English is important, which focused on their writing skills. In the following lesson, I noticed that, when asked to recall what they had discussed in the previous lesson, students struggled to remember that same activity but were quick to point out that they had taken part in a very easy exercise that was humorous and included visual aids. One student even commented that they found the coursebook boring and that sometimes its exercises made them feel demotivated and disengaged.

Most importantly, I made use of a poster (Appendix 2) which depicts a busy street in London with the phrase “*language of business and technology*”. As expected students were quick to recognize the city in the poster and were also able to understand that the reason why English is referred to as the language of business and technology is due to the fact that the use of English as a global language has become prominent in most domains. However, when asked about what kind of connection they could make between a busy street with cars and buildings and the phrase in the poster, they faltered. The aim was for them to make a connection between the busy streets of London which represent development, progress and the city life with “business and technology”. They eventually reached their conclusions but they needed a great deal of guidance from me and did not elaborate on their thoughts and the activity did not take as much time as expected.

In this context, once again I felt as if students were struggling to interrelate their skills and it was of paramount importance that they developed these skills in the

interpretation of texts which involve more than one mode of making-meaning. They were able to interpret each mode individually but when asked to connect them to a whole, they struggled due to the complexity of the type of process which requires the use of multiple competences. I thought this problem needed to be addressed, especially when we take into account these groups of students. As mentioned before, these were Engineering students and their area of study requires them to be proficient at the analysis of texts which associate different types of skills. In fact, according to Shepard et al (2006), any professional engineer must “acquire a practical wisdom that brings together the knowledge and skills in a way that best serves a particular purpose for the good of humanity” (p.429). In this context, I felt compelled to work on this particular problem as it is of paramount importance to be aware of our students needs and try our best to meet them in order to prepare them for the future.

Moreover, there was also a need to motivate them in the analysis of these texts, considering that neither the graphics, nor the poster had piqued their interest. Thus, these students' interest needed to be stimulated while also maintaining a certain degree of challenge. Therefore, it would be pertinent to go a step further and develop activities that were demanding while also fun and creative. In other words, I decided to combine fun and challenge by approaching educational topics in a manner that would both stimulate the students' motivation and maintain a certain level difficulty by developing multiple types of literacy skills and the use of all of them in an interrelating manner.

Taking this into account, there was a need to use a strategy for the purpose of encouraging students to use the target language in a challenging way and using various types of literacy skills. Moreover, learners should be provided with the freedom to use what they had learned in such a manner that promoted their creativity and interest.

In this context, after discussing ideas with my mentor and colleague, for the purpose of this action research project, I decided that the use of comic strips as a pedagogical tool to promote literacies in a fun but challenging manner, through their combination of different modes of meaning-making. To achieve the best results in terms of literacy development, students would be encouraged to explore all components of comic strips separately and interweavingly, as to understand their role in the conveyance of messages and to help them become multiliterate producers and interpreters of semiotic

texts. Moreover, students would take part in varied dynamic activities to approach the language in different ways and to improve their engagement while maintaining a certain level of challenge. The sequence of activities should also be structured as to prepare students and provide them with the necessary tools and knowledge to produce something of their own so the activities are more self-controlled and creative. The hybrid nature of these activities aims to develop different types of literacies

Not only do comics provide students with the opportunity to develop their reading skills through the text but also provide students with visual stimuli to serve as a basis for their understanding of the language and promote their engagement. By providing them with different stimuli, such as visual ones, not only are we challenging them by providing them with more information that they need to interpret but we are also engaging their attention and stimulating their interest with images. This helps combine the elements of fun and challenge.

Finally, and considering the fact that the coursebook does not provide the students with this type of text, comic strips would be created by the teacher and/or the students. All topics discussed in these comics should be relevant and topical, and the approach to these subjects should be highly educational and complex while also stimulating, fun and even humorous. The aim is to lead the students to show a deep understanding of the language and be challenged to reflect on the material in a critical and multimodal manner while keeping students engaged. In fact, this project revolves around the concept of integration in the sense that activities should combine fun and challenge as well the promotion of multiple skills.

Finally, and considering the fact that “in the most profound sense ‘research’ means trying to find answers to questions” (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 15), in the context of this project, the following question emerged: “Can comic strips be used as a multimodal teaching tool to promote literacies?”.

This can be broken down to the following focused questions:

- Can the interpretation and creation of content in a comic strip develop critical literacy?
- Can visual literacy be promoted through the analysis and design of the illustration of a Comic Strip?
- Is the use of a web-based tool to create comics an effective tool to develop digital literacy?



- Can the reading and writing of the speech in a comic strip promote print literacies?
- Will the multimodal nature of the comic strip promote the ability to make connections between multiple literacies?

All these questions are in line with the *Programa de Inglês Nível de Continuação 10.º, 11.º e 12.º Anos*, which clearly states that the student should be able to understand "diversos tipos de texto, dentro dos tópicos abordados nos domínios de referência, recorrendo, de forma adequada, à informação visual disponível" " (Moreira, Moreira, Roberto, Howcroft & Almeida, 2001, p. 10) as well as adopt an "atitude crítica perante a informação, demonstrando capacidade de a seleccionar, avaliar e adequar aos fins a que se destina" (Moreira et al, 2001, p. 13).

In this context the aims of this action research project are to:

- Develop multimodal literacy skills which allow students to read and create semiotic texts making use of all meaning-making resources efficiently and in an interconnected way;
- Promote the ability to approach multimodal texts critically, understanding the social and cultural contexts of their content;
- Develop the ability to decode and encode meaning through the use of visuals;
- Facilitate the use of genuine language through the interpretation and creation of the verbal components of comic strips;
- Develop the ability of using web-based tools to create digital multimodal texts;
- Foster subjectivity and abstraction in the interpretation of the symbolic features of comic strips;
- Combine fun and challenge through the employment of dynamic and engaging activities which approach the material in complex ways.

## **II. Theoretical background**

This chapter aims to present some of the theoretical perspectives related to the focus of this study. More specifically, I will discuss the reasons behind the rising prominence of multimodality and multiliteracies and the ways in which they have shaped the current communication landscape and generate meaning. I draw on the ideas of many researchers and authors in order to argue about the growing importance of developing multimodal literacies in our classrooms as to prepare our students to function in a complex society, which exposes them to semiotic texts on a daily basis. I also suggest the use of comic strips as multimodal pedagogical tools to promote various literacies, discussing the characteristics which make this type of texts efficient materials for the development of literacy skills.

### **2.1. Multimodality: semiotic texts in the age of technology and globalisation**

As we function in this fast-evolving world, it is clear that now more than ever communication happens in multiple meaning-making realms and as both decoders and encoders of meaning, we use and interpret, sometimes at a subconscious level, different modes of expression that oftentimes work together to convey a message. In light of this very relevant phenomenon, a new theory of communication emerged. Multimodality, as defined by Kress and Leewen (2001), is an inter-disciplinary approach, which present the set of “modes” that we use to convey meaning as means of expression. It goes beyond linguistic and textual resources and encompasses a series of other elements, such as visual, aural, spatial, gestural...

Nowadays, multimodal texts are ubiquitous. It has become essential for us to interpret the world in complex ways that transcend linguistic resources and print literacy. As Cope and Kalantzis (2000) explain, it is imperative to comprehend “the multimodal ways in which meanings are made on the World Wide Web, or in video captioning, or in interactive multimedia, or in desktop publishing, or in the use of written texts in a shopping mall” (p. 5–6). Although this concept is not something new and we have been using multimodal artefacts for a long time, the focus on multimodality has only been

gaining prominence in recent years. According to Kress and Leewen (2001), the rise of semiotics is related to the “desire to cross boundaries” in the sense that nowadays we can find “colour illustrations and sophisticated layout and typography” not only in “the pages of magazines and comic strips for example, but also the documents produced by corporations, universities, government departments etc.” (p. 1).

Moreover, all these modes and realms come together and coact to create meaning. As mentioned by Larson and Marsh (2015), “the phrase “multimodality” refers to the way in which communication involves many “modes”. Or meaning-making resources, such as word, sound, image, and layout. All of these modes are significant and work in relation to each other in the representational process” (p.91).

These various resources work together to form a message through a series of different modes of expression. From this perspective, the same degree of importance is placed on all of these modes, as they all constitute an integral part of the message that one intends to convey, complementing each other and reinforcing meaning. In a multimodal approach, the emphasis is on how “modes work together to create meaning” (Larson and Marsh, 2005, p. 92), hence they are at the same level in the representational process. Thus, it disregards the idea that all other means of expression are collateral in relation to linguistic communication in the meaning-making process. That being said, Kress (2000) explains that other modes do not operate in the same manner that linguistic resources do and, consequently, we need “an adequate theory for contemporary multimodal textual forms (...) so as to permit the description both of the specific characteristics of a particular mode *and* of its more general semiotic properties which allow it to be related plausibly to other semiotic modes” (p. 153–4). In this context, it is necessary for us to understand how each mode operates individually and with other semiotic modes in the meaning-making process so we can analyse its particularities as well as the way in which it interacts with other modes.

Furthermore, as mentioned above, we need these modes to function in this world as conveyors and interpreters of meaning. These modes of expression fulfil our social needs and the resources we employ in our communication are largely shaped by the messages we intend to convey and our social and cultural contexts. Similarly, our interpretation process is also influenced by social needs, occasions and/or contexts.

Thus, the multimodal approach has been largely influenced by Halliday's theory of Social Semiotics, which refers to the study of this social dimension of communication and the meaning-making resources we use. It extends the framework of Semiotics, first introduced by Saussure, as the “the study of signs, which can take the form of words, images, sounds, and so on...” (Larson and Marsh, 2015, p. 92) and highlights the social dimension of the modes of expression that we use to convey a message. According to Halliday (1978), “language arises in the life of the individual through an on-going exchange of meanings with significant others” and “in this sense, language is a product of the social process” (p.1). Thus, language and all concomitant meaning-making processes are largely governed by the social dimension of communication and this social dimension sets the foundation for language acquisition as well. The difference between the multimodal approach and social semiotics lies on the fact that the latter claims that the modes that we choose to communicate are arbitrary as one “has, very frequently, a range of variation (...) within which he moves about freely, in part at random” (Halliday, 1978, p. 159), whereas multimodality emphasizes the importance of the choices we make in regard to the modes we choose to employ in order to convey meaning; thus it “suggests that the intentions of communicators in terms of choices of modes made should be a focus of study” (Larson and Marsh, 2015, p. 92).

This social dimension of this theory is also connected to the very important concept of *design*, “in which we are both inheritors of patterns and conventions of meaning while at the same time active designers of meaning” (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000, p.7). Kress (2000) explains that “the remaking [of meaning] on the one hand reflects individual interest and, on the other, owing to the social history and the present social location of the individual, also reflects broad socio-cultural trends” (p.156). Thus, the negotiation of meaning is closely related to our social situations and locations and who we are as individuals. This touches on the concept of self-identity, which is also connected to critical thinking, which I will be discussing in greater detail in later chapters.

In this context, it is of paramount importance to expose our students to diverse meaning-making resources and employ a multimodal approach to teaching. There needs to be a shift from the monomodality of the written text to more innovative multimodal texts in our classrooms. As mentioned by Bearne and Wolstencroft (2007), students “are

surrounded by texts on screen and on paper which merge pictures, words and sound” and consequently, they are expected “to read images as well as print and, increasingly use computers in seeking information and composing their own texts” (p.2). This approach will serve as a challenge for students, as the interweaving of different modes of expression is a complex phenomenon and dissecting multimodal texts requires a certain degree of awareness of how each mode of communication works. With this in mind and considering that our learners are constantly exposed to multimodal texts, we must train them to have a more complex understanding of the many ways in which they convey meaning, hence it is “imperative to teach multimodality if they are to realise their potential as communicators in the twenty-first century” (Bearne and Wolstencroft, 2007, p. 20).

Moreover, it is important to draw students' attention to these individual modes and on their contribution to the meaning-making process, by deconstructing multimodal texts. In this manner, we broaden their interpretation of these modes from a mere subconscious understanding to a more complex awareness of how different modes may be used to achieve a certain result in terms of what we intend to transmit, thus “building on their implicit knowledge of modes, media and affordances and what they offer for composition and writing means” and “explicitly discussing how texts work to express ideas” (Bearne and Wolstencroft, 2007, p.18).

In order to achieve this deeper understanding of multimodal texts and to prepare them to become multimodal text makers themselves, we must provide students with “opportunities for analysis and discussion of how they are structured” (Bearne and Wolstencroft, 2007, p. 18). Only when they are aware of how to consciously identify modes, interpret them at an individual level and understand the meanings they carry, will they be able to finally apply this knowledge to their own productive activities, becoming more efficient communicators through the use of multimodality.

## **2.2. Literacy: from traditional literacy to new literacies**

As mentioned in the previous chapter, multimodal texts have become increasingly common in today's society and in order to be capable of decoding their meaning efficiently, one needs to acquire certain skills necessary to the interpretation of all

components of said texts, one must be literate. However, the concept of 'literacy' has become increasingly difficult to define. As society develops, the way in which we view literacy has also evolved. According to UNESCO (2006), "for most of its history in English, the word 'literate' meant to be 'familiar with literature' or, more generally, 'well educated, learned'" (p.148). In fact, even nowadays, "the most common understanding of literacy is that it is a set of tangible skills – particularly the cognitive skills of reading and writing" (UNESCO, 2006, p. 149). Nowadays, this is a rather inadequate notion that fails to incorporate all the different dimensions of knowledge required to be considered literate across the spectrum of its acquisition. Moreover, it does not consider the social and cultural background and context of the individual, hence new notions of what it means to be literate have emerged and expanded "from viewing literacy as a simple process of acquiring basic cognitive skills, to using these skills in ways that contribute to socio-economic development" as well as the "capacity for social awareness and critical reflection as a basis for personal and social change" (UNESCO, 2006, p. 147). Thus, literacy is not limited to skills acquisition; it encompasses a series of other meta-level processes. Essentially, it does not suffice to possess a series of skills, one must also know how to apply those skills and how the brain uses subjective knowledge and acquires objective knowledge: it is not only about *knowing*, it is about *knowing how*. A truly literate individual must understand how concepts and different elements of information operate to categorize knowledge and how they can be applied to other contexts or organized into frameworks that connect facts into larger fields of knowledge (Barber, 2012).

In this context, UNESCO (2004) defines literacy as "*the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts*" (p.13). Moreover, literacy is not stagnant. It implies constant development and "*involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society*" (UNESCO, 2004, p. 13).

But why is it imperative to develop literacies? One would think that poor literacy levels would only affect individuals at a professional level and hinder their career

aspirations, but it goes well beyond that. As mentioned by the EU High Level Groups of Experts on Literacy (2012):

Literacy empowers the individual to develop capacities of reflection, critique and empathy, leading to a sense of self-efficacy, identity and full participation in society. Literacy skills are crucial to parenting, finding and keeping a job, participating as a citizen, being an active consumer, managing one's health and taking advantage of digital developments, both socially and at work (p.21).

In this perspective, literacy has a strong impact on many dimensions of our life: from our sense of self, to our social life, to our ability to empathize and connect with others. By and large, it is a cognitive, interpersonal and intrapersonal quality that considers the learner at an individual level and values self-identity, as “literacy cannot be sustained by short-term operations or by top-down and unisectoral actions primarily directed towards the acquisition of technical skills that do not give due consideration to the contexts and motivations of learners” (UNESCO, 2004, p.8).

This new focus on the notion of individuality has led to the notion of multiple literacies, which “refers to the many ways in which literacy is employed and the many things with which it is associated in a community or society and throughout the life of an individual” (UNESCO, 2004, p.13). The acquisition and application of literacy is an individual process, which requires a specific purpose and is influenced by the cultural and social context of the learner. This notion of literacy “emphasizes that literacy is not uniform but is instead culturally and linguistically and even temporally diverse” and “shaped by social as well as educational institutions: the family, community, workplace, religious establishments and the state”. (UNESCO, 2004, p.13).

Moreover, the rapid proliferation of technology has also impacted the way in which we see literacy in more than one manner. On one hand, there is a growing need to find ways to incorporate the potentials of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in our classrooms so our students can truly be literate in today's society; on the other hand it is also providing educators with new and innovative instructional tools to improve the educational process (Leu, 2000).

In light of these new notions and how they have extended the implications of literacy, the New London Group (2000), a group of ten researchers and educators developed the notion of ‘multiliteracies’ in order to respond to “the multiplicity of communications channels and media” and to “the increasing salience of cultural and linguistic diversity” (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000, p5). Thus, multiliteracies refers to the phenomenon of globalization and how it affects communication, considering that literacy is heavily influenced by one’s cultural background and context, and the fact that we must now function in a culturally heterogeneous setting requires us to possess a series of different skills in order to be efficient communicators. It also includes the notion of multimodality and how messages are conveyed and interpreted in different realms of meaning, which has been recurrent with the proliferation of digitisation, as previously mentioned. As Fairclough (2000) explains:

The concept of Multiliteracies focuses two key developments in contemporary societies: first, cultural hybridity increasing interaction across cultural and linguistic boundaries within and between societies, and, second, multimodality: the increasing salience of multiple modes of meaning—linguistic, visual, auditory, and so on, and the increasing tendency for texts to be multimodal (p. 167).

In conclusion, nowadays, literacy refers to a set of many higher order thinking skills, an awareness of their acquisition and their application in the real world. It encompasses a variety of different concepts, such as cross-cultural communicative skills, metacognition and multimodality that we need to acquire in order to function in the age of globalisation and digitisation.

### **2.2.1. Digital literacy: incorporating technology into the classroom**

Digital technologies have been incorporated in many aspects of our life and it is of paramount importance for us to be proficient in the use of these technologies as to benefit from their immense utilities. In accordance with Lankshear and Knobel (2011), the development of digital literacy gained prominence in the mid-1990s and it was “associated with fears about the emergence of a ‘digital divide’ between those who are digitally literate and those who are not” (p. 22). As defined by the European Commission



(2018) “Digital competence means the confident and critical use of digital technology and covers the knowledge, skills and attitudes that all citizens need in a rapidly evolving digital society” (p.7).

In an age when digitisation has become ubiquitous, it is essential to possess the necessary digital competences that are required for many services and jobs. Thus, “a key task is preparing citizens to make the most of the opportunities and meet the challenges of a fast-moving, globalised and interconnected world” (European Commission, 2018, p.2). Services provided by businesses and even the government are shifting and becoming increasingly technological, as most of their services are provided online. This phenomenon “exacerbates inequalities”, as people with poor “digital literacy skills, or who cannot afford computer facilities, are unable to take advantage of these services” (EU High Level Groups of Experts on Literacy, 2012, p. 24). Consequently, citizens who have not been provided with the opportunities to develop their digital skills, due to their socioeconomic circumstances or a home environment that does not promote this kind of skills, will naturally be excluded from many opportunities that they will not be able to seize due to their lack of skills in these particular areas.

For this reason, it is essential that students are provided with the same opportunities to develop their digital competence in the classroom, thus “ensuring equity and quality of access and infrastructure” and “improving access to technology and connectivity for all children in education” and “reducing inequality and exclusion”. (European Commission, 2018, p.5). Education should set the foundation for students to be able to function actively and efficiently as citizens in society, reducing inequalities and imbalances and providing students with the tools they need to pursue their goals. In this context, it is imperative that we ensure that the development of essential skills is taking place in our classroom, including digital skills.

Furthermore, it is evident that children grow amidst semiotic digital text, whose compositions, layouts and even language are different from the traditional narrative text that they are used to working on in the classroom. However, multimodal texts should not be seen as a hindrance to their learning process. On the contrary, “all these activities should be considered as valid and valuable in relation to literacy development” (Bearne & Wolstencroft, 2007, p. 2). Digital technologies may even have contributed to

developing students' writing and reading skills, and everyday it is evident that “the process of composing, editing and revising will expand to include screen-based presentations as well as writing” (Bearne and Wolstencroft, 2007, p. 2). For this reason, we must keep up with this fast-evolving process and incorporate digital texts in our classroom.

Moreover, incorporating digital modes of learning in our lessons may be a huge motivational factor for students, as “computers, tablets and smartphones provide a clear, strong motivation for reading and writing, one that is particularly evident among young people” (EU High Level Groups of Experts on Literacy, 2012, p.42). The challenge lies in maximizing this motivation by providing students with good educational opportunities through digital forms of learning. Using these semiotic digital texts and leading students to read in a digital environment is normally more appealing to students as “online texts are usually relatively short and have plenty of visual elements to support comprehension” (EU High Level Groups of Experts on Literacy, 2012, p. 74). However, if not explored properly, the level of challenge of these semiotic texts may not be very high, as students will not pay close attention to detail when interpreting them and may only achieve a superficial understanding of the material. For this reason, “there is a great need for explicit instruction on reading strategies which give students tools for comprehending and studying” these texts and it is necessary to develop “students’ ability to read accurately and focus on details as well” (EU High Level Groups of Experts on Literacy, 2012, p. 74). For this purpose and using the digital resources available, class discussions could be created in order to collectively interpret and analyse digital texts. As mentioned by Bearne and Wolstencroft (2007), “the use of interactive whiteboards (IWBs) in classrooms means that it is much easier for a group of learners to view a piece of writing and jointly discuss editing improvements” (p.2).

We may even increase the challenge by taking a step further beyond reading and encouraging students to actually design their own semiotic digital texts. This will allow students to apply the knowledge and information they have gathered and engage in productive activities. Bearne and Wolstencroft (2007) claim that “one of the advantages of on-screen production of texts is that children will more easily see themselves as authors, with the responsibility to proofread and craft their writing” (p.2). Consequently,

their work becomes more learner-centred and autonomous, as they are provided with the creative freedom to partake in a less controlled activity. As mentioned by Larson and Marsh (2015), “In the case of the teaching and learning of digital literacy, often the use of technologies means that pupils can have more control of the pace, and possibly also the content, of their learning” (p. 64). This is not only an efficient teaching practice that promotes autonomous literacy development, but it is also motivational, as students feel like they have a say in their educational process.

Moreover, as designers of multimodal digital texts, students will have the opportunity to generate their own encoded meanings, as digitisation provides them with a diverse variety of meaning-making modes. As mentioned by Lankshear and Knobel (2011):

The technical stuff of new literacies is part and parcel of generating, communicating, and negotiating encoded meanings by providing a range of new or more widely accessible resource possibilities (‘affordances’) for making meaning. The technical dimensions of digital technologies greatly enlarge ways of generating encoded meanings available to people in comparison with what we might call conventional literacies (p. 56).

As learners are given the opportunity to generate their own encoded meanings and are asked to use the tools they were provided with to actively participate as designers in the meaning-making process in an autonomous manner, they will be expected to think critically about the resources they intend to use and about the message they want to convey, hence the need for critical thinking skills in the generation of encoded meanings and multimodal digital texts.

### **2.2.2.Critical literacy: helping our students take action in society**

It was Paulo Freire's work that set the groundwork for critical pedagogy. His work was based on his experiences as a teacher in Brazil during the time in which he was in political exile. Through his observations and attempts to raise his students' political and social awareness, he concluded that many of them feared freedom, more specifically the risks that freedom entailed. Freire claimed that it was imperative that the oppression that dehumanized the oppressed be extinguished, thus leading them toward liberation.

However, in order to eradicate the oppressive order that systematically dehumanizes the oppressed, “people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity” (Freire, 2005, p. 47), hence the importance of critical pedagogy.

In this context, Freire called for a change in the teacher-student relationship dynamics. He criticized the concept of “banking education”, in which education is “an act of depositing”, as “the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor” (Freire, 2005, p. 72). This is an education model devoid of communication, in which “the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat”, thus inhibiting creativity, critical thinking and even the sense of self-identity. He highlights that teachers' “efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization” through dialogue and partnership, as “authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about *reality*, does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication” (Freire, 2005, p. 75).

Thus, “banking education” should be abandoned in favour of problem-posing education, raising critical consciousness and encouraging students to analyse reality as human beings, capable of individual and self-controlled thinking, and not as collectors of information. Our aim should be to prepare students to be aware of the social landscape in which they live and be capable of thinking about reality critically and acknowledging its problems, encouraging them to become active participants in society as bringers of change and social intervention, so that we can achieve a fairer world.

In this context, it is imperative that we stop considering education and literacy as neutral constructs in our society. Literacy is “as a set of practices that functions to either empower or disempower people” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 98). Education can promote change and the development of self-identity or perpetuate oppressive social conventions and inhibit creativity and critical thinking.

Students should be encouraged to use language to express opinions, views and not just recite factual knowledge in order to develop critical thinking. As mentioned by Freire (2005), “liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information” (p. 75). Therefore, teachers should lead learners to establish connections between social and cultural issues and their own lives. The development of critical literacy starts when

we begin to tackle problems that require students to think critically and then voice their opinions in a communicative manner. Giving students a voice is of paramount importance; therefore, “forms of pedagogy that can function either to silence and marginalize students or to legitimate their voices in an effort to empower them as critical and active citizens” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 13).

Although Freire's work has been highly impactful for the development of critical literacy, nowadays, the framework for this pedagogy has been expanded beyond social consciousness. As mentioned above, it does not suffice to solely focus on linguistic aspects and on factual knowledge in a world that places increasing importance on the development of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills. Critical thinking is included in this new set of skills. According to Rotherham & Willingham (2009), “a growing number of business leaders, politicians, and educators are united around the idea that students need 21st century skills to be successful today” (p. 16). In this context, we must work on promoting students' critical thinking skills, in order to for them to function as efficient communicators, thinkers and even citizens. Masduqi (2006) presents the following definition for this skill:

Critical thinking is the intelligently self-controlled process of actively and skilfully conceptualizing, applying, analysing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action. (p.186)

In other words, critical thinking requires the student to use their own knowledge, experiences and understanding of the information they have acquired and apply them in an autonomous manner. In this context, critical pedagogy provides students with the necessary tools that they can use to arrive at their own conclusions and analyse the material that they are presented with. This coincides with Freire's work (see section 2.2.2.) in the sense that self-controlled thinking is valued but extends this concept by not only including social awareness but also other cognitive processes related to high-level thinking, such as analysing, evaluating and applying knowledge.

One way to develop critical thinking in our students is to lead them to interpret illustrations, for instance, encouraging them to use language to decodify visual symbols. As mentioned by Freire & Macedo (1987), “decodifying or *reading* the situations pictured

leads them to a critical perception of the meaning of culture” (p.24). That is, learners are led to understand how semiotic texts are bound to cultural representations and we interpret these images in light of our own social and cultural contexts, which may not even mirror the intentions of the author of the message. Thus, instead of memorizing words, they will understand the cultural dimension of these words and how language is largely a cultural phenomenon.

Through the analysis of visuals, students are developing their critical thinking skills through the analysis of information and the use of language. According to Waters (2016): “analysis is a category of thinking that involves students in showing their ability to put knowledge into practice by getting them to use their own content” (p. 324). In this context, at an initial stage, students’ attention should be drawn toward certain aspects that they will have to take into consideration when analyzing said information and they should be provided with the knowledge and critical tools that they will need to make use of in order to so. Thus, we allow students to “use the intellectual tools that critical thinking offers – concepts and principles that enable them to analyze, assess, and improve thinking” (Masduqi, 2006, p 186). It is also pertinent to mention that the analysis of visual stimuli does not only require and develop critical literacy. As the term suggests, it is also closely related to another type of literacy, which has also gained prominence as semiotic texts become ubiquitous, here referred to as visual literacy.

### **2.2.3. Visual Literacy: learning to see**

As mentioned previously, the proliferation of technology has changed the way we view literacy. The traditional notions of what it means to be literate are not comprehensive enough considering how texts have become increasingly multimodal - they convey meaning through pictures, illustrations, layout, graphics... However important the role of imagery and visual resources are as meaning-making components, they are oftentimes disregarded in the classroom and their importance is undermined by an overemphasis on the written word. Many consider ‘visual literacy’ to be an inferior type of literacy and as students become older, less and less attention is paid to the interpretation and design of visual texts (Kress and Leeuwen, 2006). These old notions of literacy serve as a hindrance

to the development of skills that are essential in today's society, considering how widespread the use of images has become, from the Internet, to television, to advertisements. Image is a language in itself and it conveys meaning that calls for analysis, hence the “need to know how to communicate using this language, which includes being alert to visual messages and critically reading or viewing images as the language of the messages” (Stokes, 2001, p.12).

However, new concepts related to multimodality and multiliteracies are emerging in lieu of traditional notions that used to dictate a hierarchical construct of literacy. Heinich, Molenda, Russell, & Smaldino (2002) explain that “the rapidly increasing visual capabilities of computers and digital telecommunications can only heighten the importance of visuals in education” (p. 112). For this reason, it is imperative that we ensure the development of visual literacy as it becomes an increasingly valuable ability to possess in the age of digitisation and concomitant multimodal texts.

Heinich et al. (2002) define visual literacy as “the learned ability to interpret visual messages accurately and to create such messages” (p. 113). With this in mind, it is important to consider that it does not suffice to be able to read images. One must also be capable of designing their own visuals while being aware of its encoded meanings. Heinich et al. (2002) add to this notion by explaining how we can develop visual literacy through two different approaches. The first one consists of making use of “input strategies”, that is, teaching students to interpret images efficiently “by practicing visual analysis skills” (p.113). In this approach, students are taught to decode meaning from a visual text through their analysis, developing “the skill of interpreting and creating meaning from surrounding stimuli” (p. 114). The second approach refers to “output strategies”, which consist of teaching students to generate their own encoded meanings through the creation of visuals “to express themselves and communicate with others” (p.114). While the first approach focuses on decoding meaning, the latter helps students understand how to encode it, raising their awareness of how visual presentations can carry meaning and how they can use its affordances to convey a message. For this reason, “producing media can be a highly effective way of understanding media” (Heinich et al., 2002, p. 116) as students become more conscious of all the meaning-making dimensions of visual presentation.

Moreover, as designers of visual presentations, other important skills which contribute to the encoding of meaning, may be developed, such as “sequencing”, that is the “ability to arrange ideas in a logical order” (Heinich et al., 2002, p. 116). Students are used to being presented with visuals in a logical order in films, TV shows, graphic novels and so on. For this reason, it is pertinent to teach them how to creatively arrange their own ideas through visuals so that there is a logical sequence to their production and a connection between different ideas and associated meanings, hence the need to “emphasize creative activities that call for arranging and making visuals” (Heinich et al., 2002, p. 116).

Furthermore, through the use of visuals, one can employ certain meaning-making elements that are not available through the use of verbal communication, thus “allowing for deeper insights as well as heightened abilities to communicate data and concepts” (Stokes, 2001, p.11). These meaning-making elements are specific to visual representation and differ from the ones in verbal communication. As I have mentioned before, all modes have their specificities and affordances in the process of meaning making. As mentioned by Kress and Leeuwen (2006), “language and visual communication can both be used to realize the ‘same’ fundamental systems of meaning that constitute our cultures, but that each does so by means of its own specific forms, does so differently, and independently” (p.19). Thus, it is imperative for our students to be aware of these specificities, by identifying and exploring them, and there is no better way to raise their awareness other than by encouraging them to actually make use of these visual strategies.

In this context, using visuals is a great strategy to promote communication, through which it is possible to “ensure legibility”, “reduce the effort required to interpret the message”, “increase the viewer's active engagement with the message” and “focus attention on the most important parts of the message”. (Heinich et al., 2002, p. 117).

It also draws students' attention to different modes of encoding and decoding meaning that surround them on a daily basis and can go unnoticed. In fact, it may even draw students' attention to the fact that oftentimes multimodal texts may carry contradictory messages, which mirror our heterogeneous society and how values and ideals clash. Kress and Leeuwen (2006) explain:



It is likely, and in our experience often the case, that the different modes through which texts are constructed show these social differences, so that in a multimodal text using images and writing the writing may carry one set of meanings and the images carry another. In an advertisement, for instance, it may be that the verbal text is studiously ‘non-sexist’, while the visual text encodes overtly sexist stereotypes. Given the still prevalent sense about the meaning of images, it is possible to pretend that the meaning carried in the image is there only ‘in the eye of the beholder’, something that it would not be possible to assert about verbally realized meanings. (p.20)

In light of this, we may conclude that given the subjective nature of visual interpretation and the fact that visuals carry meanings that are not as straightforward as verbal modes, it is imperative for our students to be able to analyse visual representations critically, considering their political, social and cultural dimension, thus establishing yet another connection between different types of literacy: visual and critical.

The connections do not end here. It is also of paramount importance, not only to understand how verbal and non-verbal modes may clash, but also how text and image work together to form meaning. This relationship between word and image has become a relevant concern considering how “communication technologies have spawned an explosion of possible ways in which linguistic (i.e., text) and non-linguistic (i.e., visual displays/illustrations) information can be combined for different purposes” (Benson, 1997, p.141). In this context, we may take it a step further and teach our students to encode and decode meaning through multimodal texts that include both text and visuals. Not only is it important for us to analyse each mode individually but it is also imperative to understand their connection in the meaning-making process. In order to achieve proficiency in the interpretation of these semiotic materials, it is also important for students to not only be proficient in the interpretation and creation of visuals, but also possess reading and writing skills.

#### **2.2.4. Print literacy: reading and writing can be communicative**

As I have mentioned before, the manner in which we view literacy has shifted in response to the new cognitive, cultural and sociolinguistic competencies that learners

must acquire in order to function in today's society. The increased relevance of other modes of making meaning as well as globalization and concomitant effects require individuals to achieve high levels of proficiency in a series of different skills that expand on conventional notions of what it means to be literate. For this reason, many claim that the written word and print are dying and the relevance of reading and writing is subsiding in the educational process. As the term “literacy” has been broadened and new emergent literacies appear, it would be expected that a more specific term that encompassed traditional skills would also be created. The term is ‘print literacy’ and Purcell-Gates, Jacobson & Degener (2004) offer the following definition:

Print literacy is the reading and writing of some form of print for communicative purposes inherent in peoples’ lives. Thus, it involves decoding and encoding of a linguistically based symbol system and is driven by social processes that rely upon communication and meaning. Because it is social, its practice reflects sociocultural patterns and purposes as well as power relationships and political forces. (p.26)

Having said that, is it truly accurate to claim that nowadays the focus is on New Literacies at the detriment of print literacy? Many researchers think otherwise. In fact, Dudeney, Hockly and Pegrum (2014) claim that print has gained relevance online considering that most of the online sources with which we are provided are in written form. It is true that access to semiotic resources have increased; however, students are still reading printed text. They expand on this idea by explaining that through the use of digital resources, students now “skim and scan extended texts, assess and analyse opinion pieces, and evaluate subtle cues of tone and intent in status updates” and in addition to this they also “carefully plan and compose blog entries, build persuasive arguments and counter-arguments on discussion boards, restructure and copy-edit their own and others’ work on wikis, and express themselves succinctly in tweets” (Dudeney et al, 2014, p. 8-9). In this context, it is safe to say that digitisation has led print literacy to evolve in different ways, by promoting a variety of different skills such as synthesis, argumentative skills, proofreading and so on.

As Bearne & Wolstencroft (2007) explain, “the expansion of types of text does not mean that writing will become a thing of the past”; on the contrary, “text messaging,

emails and blogging may already have contributed to greater everyday experience of writing” (p. 2). The difference resides on the fact that the processes concomitant to writing now happen more often on-screen instead of on paper.

Moreover, print literacy is not a lone phenomenon. All literacies are interwoven in some way or another. Thus, it is to be expected that print literacy will not stay stagnant while other literacies evolve and emerge. It is also in an on-going process of evolution that coincides with changes in pedagogy and in society. As mentioned by The National Institute for Literacy (2008), “The use of these skills is evident within all literacy practices” (p. 7). In fact, print literacy most often than not sets the foundation for the development of other literacies.

For instance, Deursen and Dijk (2010) argued that we cannot be truly proficient in the use of the Internet, if we do not possess the formal skills required to do so. For instance, it is impossible for an individual to be able to research and select information in an efficient manner if they are not linguistically skilled. Similarly, Wilder and Dressman (2006), upon a study on six adolescents’ Internet use, came to the conclusion that the use of the Internet requires a high level of proficiency in terms of conventional literacies, namely reading and writing.

In this context, it is safe to say that print literacy still encompasses a number of essential skills that are still very much present in modern society and that serve as the basis for other literacies. However, the acquisition and application of these skills have changed. As I have mentioned before, the development of literacies is not a mere cognitive process, but it is also a metacognitive, social and cultural one. Purcell-Gates et al (2004) explain that “reading and writing are always associated with and mediate different social activities; they are socially situated” (p.29) in the sense that we relate to the content of the materials we read and assimilate the information we gather from them in accordance with our own frameworks of knowledge. In this context, the word does not belong to the author or the reader as “the meaning of what is written or read, and the meaning of the act of reading or writing, is necessarily contextual” (Purcell-Gates et al, 2004, p.30) and, therefore, social. Moreover, we are once again revisiting the concept of self-identity and how our own experiences and contexts shape the way we interpret the world, a notion that is also closely related to critical literacy. Furthermore, I would also

argue that it is pretty difficult to be truly literate in terms of critical thinking without print literacy. As mentioned by Vlieghe (2005), “gaining mastery over written language literally forms us: it decides on who we are, on what we can do, say and think” and “it is the linear and consecutive order of written sentences that underpins the clarity and order of what we see today as a sound argument” (p. 214).

Taking into consideration all the dimensions of print literacy development, especially the fact that it is still a social process, it is imperative to use writing and reading as a way to promote the use and comprehension of genuine language that can be used in communication. As mentioned by Purcell-Gates et al (2004), print literacy development should consist of the “acquisition, improvement, elaboration, and extension of the abilities and strategies necessary to comprehend and produce written language for communicative purposes within sociocultural contexts” (p. 26).

In light of this, Communicative Language Teaching has gained prominence as this approach prepares students to function efficiently as communicators. The main goal is to promote fluency, dismissing the overemphasis on accuracy. Richards (2006) explains that “fluency is natural language use occurring when a speaker engages in meaningful interaction and maintains comprehensible and on-going communication despite limitations in his or her communicative competence” (p. 14). As mentioned above print literacy development is social and closely linked to communicative purposes; therefore, a Communicative Approach does not and should not disregard the relevance of reading and writing. However, all activities should in one way or another contribute to the development of our students' proficiency as communicators by focusing on meaningful and genuine language that may occur in real life situations. As Ellis (2003) mentions, all activities should “result in language use that bears a resemblance, direct or indirect, to the way language is used in the real world” (p.16). In light of this, Richards (2006) proposes some purposeful activities to promote fluency in the ELT classroom. According to him, activities should “reflect natural use of language”, “require meaningful use of language”, “require the use of communication strategies” and “seek to link language use to context” (p. 14). In this context, we need to make use of materials which can provide students with the opportunity to use language in a communicative and meaningful manner. Texts which make use of language that is genuine and authentic help to develop the skills of reading,

writing, speaking and listening in an integrated way, just as in authentic communicative situations” (Nunan, 2013, p. 70). A good example of a type of text which can promote a wide range of different skills is comic strips, which make use of different types of modes of meaning-making and require the student to use a wide range of skills to work with them (Jacobs, 2013).

## **2.3. Comic strips as multimodal texts in the promotion of literacies**

### **2.3.1. Definitions and characteristics of comic strips as multimodal texts**

The first comic strips ever created in both England and America always included an element of humour and their main aim was to be comical, hence the term “comic”. Although different genres of comics have emerged, this attribute is still used. Nowadays, comics have expanded beyond mere humorous purposes, tackling social and political issues, frequently with the use of satire. In light of this shift in genre, some attempts were made with the aim of replacing ‘comic strips’ with new terms, such as “Graphic Novels”, but they were never truly realised and the term ‘comic’ remained due to popular usage. For this reason, it is possible to encounter both terms, albeit referring to the same thing. (Saraceni, 2001).

In terms of their organisation, they are composed of different units: a series of rectangular frames organized in a sequential order, named “panels”. Panels depict instants of action, but they are not exactly considered frozen moments, considering that “comics panels typically contain pieces of dialogue that are longer than the duration of a camera shot” (Saraceni, 2001, p.7). For this reason, the instants of action displayed in comic strips are not exactly equivalent to the ones presented in, for instance, photographs.

The panels contain the image, which refers to the visual narrative, and the speech, which is the textual narrative (Kannenbergh, 2001). The speech is inserted into the image through the use of balloons, which is one of the main and most recognizable characteristics of comic strips. They are “used to report speech or thought, and that is why the terms speech balloon and thought balloon are used” (Saraceni, 2001, p. 9). Thus, balloons consist of direct speech and it displays what the character is saying or thinking. This type of speech is an essential element of the narrative considering that it engages the

reader's involvement in the story and deepens their understanding of the story depicted. The character which is speaking/thinking is identified by the tail of the balloon, which points toward them.

Finally, panels are graphically separated by a blank space called the gutter. Although this particular element may seem irrelevant, it is actually of great symbolic importance. The gutter “is the space containing all that happens between the panels” (Saraceni, 2001, p. 9). For this reason, the reader must use their imagination to reconstruct the missing information from one panel to the next in order for the narrative to make sense.

But what exactly are comic strips? According to Saraceni (2001), comics consist of the “employment of both words and pictures” and “texts organised into sequential units, graphically separated from each other” (p. 5). Jacobs (2013) expands on this definition by claiming that comics are “multimodal texts”, “an order of discourse” and “discrete discursive events”, in the sense that they “are media that use a combination of sequential art and text in order to create narrative meaning for the audience” (p. 5).

In this context, it is pertinent to mention that the combination of text and image, which tell a story is not a singularity of comics per se. It is the manner in which linguistic and visual elements are presented and how they interact with each other that are a unique characteristic. This combination is what makes comic strips multimodal texts. Jacobs (2013) explains:

This combination of words and images—multimodality— works to create meaning in very particular and distinctive ways; in a multimodal text, meaning is created through words, visuals, and the combination of the two in order to achieve effects and meanings that would not be possible in either a strictly alphabetic or strictly visual text (p. 5).

Saraceni (2001) explains that in comics, words and pictures have two different types of relationships: blend and collaboration. The first refers to the way in which iconic (pictures) and symbolic (verbal) elements work together to convey the same message. The latter refers to cases in which, although visuals and verbal elements work together to convey meaning, they do it in different ways, acting as individual meaning-making elements that complement each other while remaining distinct. This view of comics as

multimodal texts that include varying relationships between their visual and textual elements destroys the notion that these texts are a simple and superficial form of narrative and “the picture of meaning making becomes much more complex” (Jacobs, p.12). This complexity stems from the combination of different modes that can be linguistic, visual, gestural, spatial and even aural, and the way we raise students’ awareness of these different modes of making meaning may contribute to the development of Literacies.

### **2.3.2. Promoting literacies through speech in comic strips**

This subchapter focuses solely on the use of ‘speech’ in comic strips and how the verbal characteristics of these type of multimodal texts may contribute to the development literacies.

One of the most important characteristics of comics is related to their depiction of real-life situations of communication. As mentioned above, the use of speech balloons to report on what characters are saying translates to more authentic and interactive language. As mentioned by Csabay (2006), in comics, “life-like situations and expressions are used in spoken, colloquial language”, more specifically “idioms, reduced forms, slang, and expressions that require shared cultural knowledge” (p.25). For this reason, comic strips draw students’ attention to a more informal and genuine language that they might come across in real life situations and to generate meaning from this type of language.

Saraceni (2001) claims that “the language of comics has many similarities with the language we use every day” (p.5). He expands on this notion by explaining how there are two different sets of words: functional words and content words. The first refer to words used to establish grammatical connections between different components of a sentence (connectors, articles...) or to specify certain aspects, such as place and time. On the other hand, content words express meaning and contribute to the content of the message. In the language of comics, “there are functional components and content components” (Saraceni, 2001, p. 5). It is evident that learners encounter many difficulties in the use of many functional words in EFL classrooms as reported by studies (Abe, 2001; Lee, 2003; Fei, 2006). Moreover, students do not always have the opportunity to analyse texts that contain words that specify place and time. However, the use of these words in

everyday communication is extremely frequent and more characteristic of genuine communication, which requires links between the ideas we intend to convey. For this reason, drawing students' attention to this type of language is of paramount importance.

The use of authentic language, as well as the linguistic features which are also culturally relevant contribute to the development of print literacy as, through the use of comics, students will become more proficient in their ability to read and write forms of print for communicative purposes. Learners will be more aware of how to use language in a purposeful and meaningful way, in order for it to carry meaning that is decodable and significant.

Furthermore, the use of Speech in comics goes well beyond the purpose of being read. As mentioned by Saraceni (2001), "words can be looked at as well as read" and "their meanings derive from their visual as well as from their verbal value" (p. 22). In other words, comic language can be interpreted not only from a linguistic point of view but also from a visual perspective. For instance, in comics, bold or capitalized words are normally "used to emphasise certain words or to indicate loudness" (Saraceni, 2001, p.20). Thus, as mentioned by Jacobs (2013) the way we choose to present the text "aids in indicating tone, voice inflection, cadence, and emotional tenor by giving visual representation to the audio element of the text" (p.14). Saraceni (2001) elaborates on this concept by mentioning that, italics, for example, may also contribute to the meaning of a sentence and emphasize the message one intends to transmit. For instance, consider the following sentence, adapted from Saraceni (2001), and how we can change its meaning by using italics:

*I* have two cats. (the focus is on the fact that I am the person who owns the cats)

I *have* two cats. (the focus is on the fact that I own the cats)

I hate *two* cats. (the focus is on the fact that there are two cats)

I have two *cats*. (the focus is on the fact that the animals I own are cats)

This is obviously a visual technique that we may employ using words that leads them to acquire connotations beyond its verbal meaning and requires a higher level of interpretation skills, thus developing visual literacy. It is an interesting approach to this type of literacy as we frequently only associate images with the development of visual



interpretation skills; however, there are many visual techniques that we may employ with alternative resources. In fact, in the case of those who are not visually impaired, “the skill of reading is already a visual skill, since it involves the recognition of the distinct letters of the alphabet, and the linking of them with appropriate sounds” (Mitchell, 2009, p. 11). Once more, it is pretty evident that all modes of making meaning are connected and this is even more evident in comics where there is a great deal of creative freedom to employ different types of techniques to convey meaning.

In this context, it is evident that the language of comic strip transcends the linguistic domain and holds more semiotic connotations. For instance, the language used in comic strips oftentimes makes use of humour, puns, word-plays, metaphors, irony and other figures of speech. This is related to the subfield of linguistics and semiotics called Pragmatics, which refers to “the rules for appropriate social use and interpretation of language in context” (Martin & Ford, 2007, p. 89). For this reason, processing a joke requires certain cognitive skills that go beyond literal linguistic interpretations as we “must develop the ability to make several complex linguistic and social inferences” in order to “recognize that the intended meaning of the statement is not the surface meaning” (Martin & Ford, 2007, p. 245). This can only be achieved if one is capable of recognizing pragmatic functions in speech. As expected, in second language acquisition, this type of ability needs to be developed. At a first stage, language learners will find it hard to recognize humour and figures of speech because they are focused on the linguistic aspects of the sentence and have not yet developed a “pragmatic competence”, which prevents them from making inferences and presuppositions. For instance, Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) claim that, “even fairly advanced language learners’ communicative acts regularly contain pragmatic errors, or deficits, in that they fail to convey or comprehend the intended illocutionary force or politeness value” (p.10). For this reason one may argue that using comic strips in the English Language Teaching classroom may be a challenge, as it requires students to possess a certain degree of cultural knowledge that, if absent, will pose a real problem for the understanding of these type of texts. However, if we considered the fact that in order for students to be truly literate they must have the ability to use language appropriately according to context, comic strips provide students with the opportunity to be exposed to language that really requires them to use cognitive processes

connected to pragmatics. In fact, Williams (1995) conducted a study to determine just how effective the use of comic books can be as pedagogical materials for ESL students. He reported that using comic strips in second language classrooms can raise students' awareness of pragmatics. Of course, teachers must be aware of the problems the use of comic strips may pose and put effort into providing the students with the necessary information and knowledge for them to interpret the material, guiding them if need be.

In conclusion, the use of language in comic strips is unique and provides students with authentic language, not just linguistically but also in terms of pragmatics, which leads them to understand language at a sociolinguistic level. These are all competencies essential in the development of print literacy. Furthermore, it also allows the use of certain visual techniques to emphasize meaning, contributing for the promotion of Visual Literacy.

### **2.3.3. Promoting literacies through the use of illustrations in comic strips**

This subchapter will focus on how the use of illustrations in comic strips may promote Literacies. We have already established that one of the most recognizable features of comic strips is their combination of image and text, which expands and reinforces meaning. As mentioned by Jacobs (2013), "the key to reading the comic lies in going beyond the way we make meaning from the words alone" (p. 14), thus we must consider considering other visual modes as well and how they can include gestural and spatial elements.

One of the most obvious positive features of the visual nature of comics is the way in which image reinforces the meaning of words, thus fostering memory retention. Csabay (2006) explains that "if a word, expression, or concept is accompanied by a picture (a visual image in one's mind), then the learner will memorize and recall it more easily" (p. 25). This type of association makes words more memorable, not only because visuals are impactful but also because one can retrieve information from existing frameworks of knowledge and establish connections between new words and visual concepts that are familiar. Through the use of visual literacy skills, "the reader synthesizes how a visual representation cooperates with what is read in the text" and "new connections extend

comprehension” (McVicker, 2007, p. 85). Moreover, as the reader analyses the combination of words and image, they might create important connections between the information they are provided with and deepen their knowledge as “they confirm or disconfirm how the new information fits into existing schema and a wider knowledge base is formed for future reference” (McVicker, 2007, p.85).

Not only does this process promote visual literacy and critical literacy in the analysis and synthesis of the visual representation but it also promotes print literacy in the sense that the “activation of the reader's schemata” provides “a redundancy of information to enhance the reader's comprehension” (Wright and Sherman, 1999, p. 67). They also give students a deeper understanding of the words by connecting them to visual representation, aid memory retention and “enhance and extend the text communication” by creating “understanding of unknown factors in the text’s language” (McVicker, 2007, p.85), such as space, colour and other elements that in verbal texts are left to the reader's imagination.

In fact, comic strips provide students with a better understanding of gestural and spatial elements. According to Jacobs (2013), “the gestural refers to facial expression and body posture, while the spatial refers to the meanings of environmental and architectural space, which, in the case of comics can be conceived as the layout of panels on the page and the relation between these panels through the use of gutter space” (p. 14). In light of this, through visual literacy, students are encouraged to interpret certain elements that they will have to interpret in their daily lives, such as people's facial expressions and gestures, which are essential in social interaction. In fact, it develops students' pragmatic competence, as they understand these visual texts at a sociolinguistic level.

Moreover, in terms of spatial elements, it is pertinent to mention that the layout of the comic strips is also an essential feature that must be taken into account. As I have mentioned before, the gutter is an element of utmost importance. This blank space contains all the information missing from one panel to the next and “this means that the reader has to guess the missing elements in order to reconstruct the flow of the story” (Saraceni, 2001, p. 9). There is a process of negotiation of meaning as these physical spaces can also be considered conceptual spaces, “through which connections are made and meanings are negotiated” (Jacobs, 2013, p. 9). Readers must rely on their inference

skills in order to fill the gaps, using their own “world knowledge and contextual clues” (Saraceni, 2001, p. 52). This process of meaning making is made through visual literacy as well as critical literacy as students apply their own pre-existing schemata to generate meaning that is not directly provided to them. Students will have to not only rely on their own frameworks of knowledge but also on context, speech and illustration to interpret the message and “in these multiple realms of meaning making, comics are inherently multimodal, a way of thinking that moves beyond a focus on strictly word-based literacy” (Jacobs, 2013, p.9).

#### **2.3.4. Promoting literacy through the analysis and creation of content in comic strips**

Thus far, most of the discussions regarding the use of comic strips as pedagogical tools have been heavily focused on interpreting them from a linguistic perspective while some have expanded on this notion by incorporating visual interpretation skills as well. However, not much has been said about the actual narrative and the way in which different modes of expressing meaning can come together to convey a message with a cultural and/or social impact. The term I decided to use to refer to this characteristic is 'content'.

First of all, one of the most important features of comics is its provision of textual context, that is, “the language that *surrounds* a portion of text” (Saraceni, 2001, p. 36). Thus, the language that students encounter when reading comics is presented to them in context and not at a word level. The content of a comic strip is comprised of a series of meaning making resources which provide a context to the message that is being conveyed and “this way students will associate the words with a certain context, and they can recall and apply it better than just learning a single word with a corresponding meaning” (Csabay, 2006, p.25).

Furthermore, this context is organized in a sequenced manner and most of the time it depicts a story. Its narrative nature makes “it is easier for students to learn a language” as “they are given connected sentences that have a logical structure and a story line, instead of disconnected, randomly organized phrases” (Csabay, 2006, p.24). This facilitates the retention of information and makes it easier for students to retrieve knowledge from their own schemata and connect it with new language as they are given

more information about the application of said language and how it is used in context. The language learners can work on from comics is not only related to lexicon but it is also related to textual structure as “students can follow the story line step by step and can recall its structure more easily because logic helps them”(Csabay, 2006, p. 24). Having said that, learners will become familiar with all different modes which carry meaning and how they interact with each other in context. The analysis of these elements and their connections is called cohesion (Saraceni, 2001). In order for a narrative to make sense as a whole, it must be coherent. All different modes of communication must work together to make meaning in a harmonious way so that the story can progress in logical way. Saraceni (2001) explains that “one fundamental way in which two or more panels are linked together is by having elements in common” such as “characters, objects, buildings, background, or even very small details” (p. 37). Drawing students’ attention to these links is essential and raises their awareness of how to express more congruent messages through more complex ways of making meaning, such as narratives and multimodal texts, whose content is significantly richer than that of loose sentences. This may help them become better communicators as they learn how to establish connections not only in terms of modes, through collaborations or blends, but also in regard to their ideas.

Thus, by providing students with a context, comics lead the students to partake in meaning making processes, which not only teach them how to use language appropriately and in context but also help them understand the structure and logical elements of what makes a coherent narrative. These are all essential skills in language learning and print literacy, as students become more proficient users of the language and understand how to operate it in a congruent manner.

Furthermore, these narratives are “a living, daily representation of real life” (McVicker, 2007, p.86), depicting situations and language that one might encounter in real life. As students are presented with these multimodal texts and attempt to decode their meaning, they very often establish connections between their own experiences and cultural and social context. As mentioned by McLaughlin (2004), students use their “background knowledge to understand relationships between their ideas and the ideas presented by the author of the text” (p. 53). Thus, what they are seeing and this process of association affects the way they perceive the text and its symbolism. These are all

processes related to Critical Thinking, as we have discussed before. According to Neeley and Wylie (2016), comics “are symbolic texts that require interpretation based on cultural awareness and critical thinking” (p. 12). This process should be encouraged instead of suppressed. We cannot impose a “correct” interpretation on our students but instead it is important for teachers to be willing to entertain interpretations proposed by students. This makes for a more learner-centered pedagogy, one that takes into account the students' ideas and values and, consequently, their sense of self in the sense that “learners are asked to generate personal responses to something in the text, responses which necessitate the production of original discourse” (Hirvela, 1996, p. 128). This approach is very much related to the Reader-Response Theory. Hirvela (1996) expands on this notion:

Reader-response theory's origins are in the field of literary criticism. It challenges traditional emphases on authorial intention in a text, and on the text itself, in assigning supremacy to the interpretation of texts, asserting instead that the reader plays at least an equal role in the interpretative process (p. 128).

In this context, we are not imposing the author's intended message but instead we are acknowledging the fact that the reader's context, circumstances and abilities cannot be disregarded in the interpretation process and “the interpretations or reactions they describe are a reflection of themselves as well as the text” (Hirvela, 1996, p. 130). Therefore, the suppression of the variety of forces that the interpreter brings into play is a suppression of oneself. In this context, Hirvela (1996) proposes that instead of asking our students about what the author intended to convey, we ask them about how they felt about the text and what their opinions are in regard to its content. Comic strips, as multimodal texts, which make use of a variety of different meaning making resources and depict authentic situations of interaction are a valuable material that allows us to “engage students' sense of creativity and ability to take different perspectives, encouraging them to think outside the box and beyond the literal message” (Neeley and Wylie, 2016, p. 11). In light of this, it is important to allow students to voice their own perspectives of what they see and encourage their own interpretation processes and, thus, “the responses are personal, because the tasks require that learners express opinions about the text” (Hirvela, 1996, p. 128), promoting the sense of individual thinking and critical literacy.

Thus, we have acknowledged that language learning should be an individual journey, in which students choose their own paths with some guidance and orientation from teachers and materials. Not only should they be allowed to bring their own personal discourses to the classroom, but they should also be encouraged to enrich their own frameworks of knowledge by engaging with different types of social, cultural and linguistic discourse. Comics may provide this variety of elements. As I have mentioned before, comics are multimodal artefacts of real cultural and social significance in the ELT classroom, as they depict social interactions and its interpretation is greatly influenced by our own cultural and social background, which may pose problems for students or provide them with the opportunity to be exposed to other cultural realities, learning from them. It is the teacher's responsibility to find the most efficient ways to approach the material and maximise the pedagogical potential of this type of texts.

Ultimately, it does not suffice to present students with factual knowledge or ask them to memorize a series of facts. It is important that they retain some factual knowledge; however, even more important is their ability to understand how those facts affect or may affect them and other people at the present moment and in the future because students “not only need to think locally and globally, but also currently and hypothetically” (Abrams, 2015, p. 28). Thus, allowing students to think subjectively by applying the knowledge they have retained will surely be a great way to promote critical thinking.

### **III. Design of the study**

For the purpose of this study, I observed lessons, collected data and reflected on my findings to identify a problem which served as the main focus of the study. I then conducted a literature review in order to identify and summarize existing research and theoretical perspectives on the topic of this project (see chapter II). In this chapter, I will be presenting the plan of action as well as the data collection tools which I used in the implementation of this project.

#### **3.1. Plan of Action**

The aim of this study is to answer the question: “Can the use of comic strips as multimodal teaching tools promote literacies?”. As mentioned in section 1.3.1. and 1.3.2, from my observations, it was evident that students were struggling when working with multimodal texts. I first noticed this when observing one of my mentor's lessons, which led me to conclude that students were not efficiently engaging in the process of interpretation when exploring graphics. Their difficulty in establishing connections between the visual elements and the linguistic annotations was notable. My assumptions were confirmed when I employed an activity in my first taught unit with this class which included a very simple poster. The contributions offered by the students were not as satisfactory as I expected. I concluded that although these were very impressive students, they could be challenged further with regard to multimodality and multiliteracies and there was a need to teach students to generate connections between different modes of expression and different types of skills, especially considering the fact that multimodality and multiliteracies are intrinsic to the field of engineering and it is imperative to cater to our learners' needs. Moreover, it was also of paramount importance to take into account students' motivation. Learners were not interested in the exploration of graphics and they were also rather apathetic toward the analysis of the poster. With this in mind, I concluded that if we intended to work on multimodal texts, it was imperative to pique their interest,



in order to achieve the best results. For this reason, I chose to employ comic strips as a pedagogic instrument to promote different types of literacies through multimodality.

In this context, it was imperative to maintain a degree of challenge that coincided with the learners' potential. As mentioned before, these were engineering students, who, in addition to being proficient language users, were also extremely hard-working and ambitious. In light of these characteristics, I made sure the activities employed required the use of varied cognitive processes that allowed students to expand on their levels of literacy, going beyond reading and writing and including critical analysis, visual interpretation, abstraction. In this context, the teacher's role in most activities was to be a “facilitator”, in the sense that in the classroom I tried to be someone who “provides opportunities for students to use and practice the language and to reflect on language use and language learning” (Richards, 2006, p.23) and to engage in discussions with the students, encouraging them to voice their opinions and leading them to reach their own conclusions by applying the knowledge and information they had acquired during the lesson. Concomitantly, as a way to promote the use of self-controlled thinking, students were generally given the creative freedom to interpret and create meaning in their own terms, using individual discourse to do so, hence there were no “right” or “wrong” answers, which followed Paulo Freire's (2005) ideas about the development of critical thinking as, according to him, “the teacher cannot think for her students, nor can she impose her thought on them” (p. 77) . However, the quality of their contributions was still assessed in terms of how well-justified and elaborate their ideas were.

Moreover, it was imperative that students be provided with the necessary tools and information to partake in subsequent self-controlled activities. In this context, these activities were all carried out at the last stage of the lesson (last 10-20 minutes). Throughout the lesson, all activities employed aimed to work on the information and linguistic items that students would need to apply afterwards. Thus, learners were given the opportunity to add new information to their pre-existing schemata and then apply it in accordance with how that information fitted into their own ideas, values and frameworks of knowledge.

Additionally, as a way to create a balance between challenge and fun, activities would need to be engaging and motivating, including stimulating visual presentations,

collaboration between students, and the use of humour. Comic strips are extremely motivating due to their narrative and humorous nature. On one hand, humour serves as a “trigger of amusement and laughter, on the other hand, humour works not only as a student motivator but it also creates a more relaxed and positive classroom atmosphere which in turn is beneficial for learning” (Krause, 2015, p.16). Moreover, the fact comic strips present content in a narrative form leads students to become “motivated to continue reading and to become more involved in the content” (Csabay, 2006, p.24).

Moreover, as Kress (2000) argues, it was important to deconstruct multimodal texts and understand just how each mode of communication must be considered in the interpretation process. For this reason, different activities were employed which aimed to analyse each mode and decode their individual connotations, so as to raise students' awareness of how each element of the comic strip carries meaning. Afterwards, their attention was drawn to the comprehensive content of the comic strip, that is, the correlation between the different modes and to the general meaning of all meaning making resources. Thus, students were led to “link the different skills (...) together, since they usually occur so in the real world” (Richards, 2006, p. 13).

Finally, considering the fact that the coursebook did not include comic strips, all materials were either obtained from an outside source or designed by me, using Storyboard.com, a web based comic strip creation tool. In an effort to incorporate technology into my lessons, not only did I present the students with the comics by using the technological resources provided by the school, but I also included them in the process of making comic strips by employing activities in which they were allowed to use the software to make comics. This corresponds with Abrams's (2015) opinions on how efficient teaching through the use of technology requires us to “help students become analysts and inventors who use the tools at their disposal to support and extend their understandings” (p.28). Moreover, they are provided with the opportunity to apply their knowledge in a self-controlled activity by decoding meaning through the use of various modes and literacies, as “students are moving in and about their various literacies, using technology to communicate and make meaning in a variety of ways” (Abrams, 2015, p.28).

### 3.2. Methodology

As mentioned before, the study carried out that is being described in this report refers to an Action Research project, that consists of “applied research, carried out by practitioners who have themselves identified a need for change or improvement” (Bell, 2005, p.8). Thus, as a reflective practitioner, I observed a group of students whom I was assigned to teach as part of my teaching practicum, collected data and then identified an issue that, in my point of view, should be addressed. Subsequently, I consulted relevant literature and, in accordance with my findings, formulated a plan of action to employ in the classroom. Throughout the whole process, I reflected on the outcomes and collected data to consider the effectiveness of the plan, in accordance with my experiences and feedback, as this type of project requires a “continuous process of research” (Brown and McIntyre, 1981, p. 245). Thus, one can claim that the most important characteristic of an action research project relates to its “close link between research and teaching” (Dörnyei, 2011, p.191). Moreover, the project was employed in two cycles, that is, the plan of action was implemented in two different stages. Between both of these stages, I had the opportunity to reflect and reconfigure my strategy in order to improve its effectiveness. Thus, the strategy used for the implementation of a second cycle stemmed from my reflections on the results achieved in the first cycle as an action research project is “interpretive and needs to be thought of in terms of further refinements” (Norton, 2009, p. 55). For this reason, minor deviations were incorporated as to approach the problem in a different manner with the purpose of ameliorating the issue more efficiently, as it is by “carrying out further cycles of research that we begin to form a holistic view of our practice and the elements that need progressive refinement” (Norton, 2009, p. 55). Thus, the first cycle is comprised of five activities which were carried out in class discussions, whereas, in the second cycle, students were engaged in group work to promote autonomy and self-controlled thinking.

This project incorporates qualitative research, in the sense that it involved “data collection procedures that result primarily in open-ended, non-numerical data which is then analysed primarily by non-statistical methods” (Dörnyei, 2011, p.24). In this context, the results of all activities carried out and the students' contributions and work were

assessed qualitatively, that is, terms of how well-thought-out and elaborate their responses were. Thus, the focus was not on *how much* students know but on *how well* they can apply their knowledge and language and the nature of this project is “fundamentally interpretative” (Dörnyei, 2011, p. 38), as it is based by my subjective interpretation of the data. However, quantitative data was also collected for the purpose of this research and, therefore, there is a combination of both types of data with the aim of gaining “a better understanding of a complex phenomenon by converging numeric trends from quantitative data and specific details from qualitative data” (Dörnyei, 2011, p. 42). That being said, words and numbers may complement each other in terms of the information that they carry, in the sense that they can support and inform each other.

In terms of the tools I used to discern the effectiveness of this project, various techniques were used. I then corroborated my findings through triangulation, a method which is used “as a way of validating hypotheses by examining them through multiple methods” (Dörnyei, 2011, p. 43), thus ensuring the validity of this study by converging different methods, which, as mentioned before, complement and support each other. In this context, not only will I interpret my findings but I will also examine them in terms of their relation to one another, analysing the ways in which they converge or, in some cases, diverge, as “exploring the conflicting results can lead to enhanced understanding” (Dörnyei, 2011, p. 165).

I will now proceed with a brief presentation of the data collection tools which I employed for the purpose of this project. I will begin by reiterating the fact that an action research project, which is mostly qualitative in nature, requires frequent reflection as to ensure the validity of the conclusions to which the researcher has arrived through the interpretation of the data. For this reason, I used the reflective journals that I wrote during the course of this project as data, taking into account that “reflecting on practice as part of an action research cycle is essential if any enduring change is to be effected, because it involves some transformation from previously held assumptions to adopting a new framework” (Norton, 2009, p. 23). These journals contain information regarding the activities carried out for the purpose of the project, the results achieved, obstacles that I encountered, unexpected events and reactions from the students and how I felt about the whole process. I found this to be valuable data considering the fact that “personal agency

is an important part of qualitative inquiries and the meta-data generated by the researcher offer valuable insights into the project” (Dörnyei, 2011, p. 161). These reflections were more often than not, written prior to discussions with my mentor, in which she provided me with her feedback on what she had observed. For this reason, the reflective nature of these journals was also collaborative, as it was not only based on my personal feelings and experiences but also on the information I gathered from my mentor's feedback. This is of paramount importance, considering that “there is a need for engaging in reflective and constructive dialogue” (Norton, 2009, p. 29) to obtain additional viewpoints on my practice and on the effectiveness of the activities employed.

Furthermore, depending on the activity that was being employed, I chose different methods to collect data in regard to the students' work, as to select the method that was appropriate to each activity. In some cases, I made use of observations by reporting the written record of the class discussions carried out in the lesson. I found that creating dialogues between the students and myself served as an efficient pedagogical strategy when the objective was to lead students to reflect on the material through the development of visual interpretation skills and critical thinking. In this context, I chose to collect data on these tasks through my participant-as-an-observer role (Bechhofer & Paterson, 2000, p. 93), that is, I was an active participant in these activities by prompting discussion; however, my contributions were not equivalent to those offered by the students, in the sense that the students were the ones analysing the material with only my assistance and, for this reason, the focus of the activities was on observing and collecting data on the students' participation. Recorded observations serve as extremely efficient data collecting technique, in the sense that through interviews and questionnaires, the researcher only obtains data with regard to how students perceive those activities, whereas, through observation, one can actually witness and collect real-time data on how said activities were carried out. It is also pertinent to mention, that as an observer, it is of paramount importance to be aware of what kind of information one intends to gather from these discussions. As mentioned by Bell (2005), we must ask ourselves whether we are “more interested in the behaviour of individuals or the content of what is being said” (p. 190). In this context, the aim of these observations did not refer to the students' conduct or to the frequency of their participation, but the content of their contributions in the context

of multimodality and multiliteracies. With this in mind, for the transcription of this class discussion, I also took into account the aims of the project (see chapter I) which have implications “for the form and content of transcripts since different features of data will be of analytic interest” (Bailey, 2008, p.128). One of the most relevant aspects to consider refers to the level of detail that the researcher chooses to incorporate in their transcription, especially with regard to non-verbal communication. Considering that the aim of these discussions focussed on the content of the students' utterances rather than the way in which they spoke them, I chose to omit certain aspects of their speech and report a naturalized transcription, which “occurs when written features of discourse have primacy over the oral, so written down talk exhibits many features of written language that do not actually occur in spoken talk”, that is, I included commas, full stops and other linguistic items characteristic of written discourse, not only to ensure legibility but to place the focus on the content of the students' contributions. However, I did include a few coding methods in my transcript, which I thought were relevant and added to the meaning of the students' utterances and the transcription conventions I used were based on the ones provided by the Vienna Oxford International Corpus of English (Appendix 3).

Furthermore, observations were not the only record of the students' work which I obtained. I also collected students' written work. Most activities require the students to fill in incomplete comic strips or to create them from scratch and are inherently connected to technology, considering that the use of a web-based tool for the creation of multimodal texts was a constant throughout the whole process. In fact, the digital nature of these texts was of paramount importance for the purpose of this project, considering that it aimed to promote these students' multiliteracies through the exploration of multiple realms of meaning-making and representational processes, including digital literacy. As mentioned by Abrams (2015), “classrooms need to integrate technologies and practices that promote agency, active spectatorship and/or apprenticeship, and cooperative competition” (p.59). Having said that, this project aims to encourage students to become efficient producers and interpreters of meaning through the utilization of technology, hence the use of student-made digital texts as data.

As mentioned before, the aim of this project was to promote literacies through the use of a multimodal pedagogical tool and we have established that, in order to become a

truly literate person, some essential skills are required that go beyond the mere acquisition of factual knowledge. A literate student should know how to apply said knowledge, encode and decode meaning and establish connections between different pieces of information and multiple realms of meaning-making. Thus, for the analysis of the results achieved during the course of this project, it was imperative that all these competences be considered and incorporated into the criteria employed, considering that assessing the way in which students interact with multimodal texts “requires teachers to rethink traditional methods of assessment to include non-traditional elements and rhetorical situation” (Cook & Kirchoff, 2017, p. 88). In this context and following the views of the New London Group (see section 2.1.) on how important it is, in the context of multimodality and multiliteracies, to be able to explore different types of modes and literacies at a separate level as well at an interrelating level, the criteria I used to assess the students’ work incorporated both these levels and aimed to assess students, not only in the way they used their literacy skills, but also on how efficiently they were able to make connections between them.

In fact, I created a set of criteria which was based on the feedback I received from the students when asked what makes a good comic strip. Cook & Kirchoff (2017) claim that it is important “to consider including students in developing relevant and important assessment criteria for each project used in the classroom” (p. 88). However, I did not use that set of criteria for the purpose of this study. The task was still useful, considering that I made sure I showed it to them when they were producing their own texts and it served as a set of guidelines to assist them in that process

Regarding the assessment of the way in which students made connections between different literacies and modes, the criteria I used to analyse the data I gathered from the students was based on Biggs and Collis’s (1982) SOLO taxonomy. SOLO is an acronym for 'Structure of the Observed Learning Outcome' and this taxonomy posits that the application of knowledge “involves using a set of components (facts or concepts; processes or skills) that may be used independently or integrated with each other”. Thus, it is used to classify the complexity of a students’ work and thought process in different levels of understanding, which determine how much the student knows and how well can they apply that information. The fact that this taxonomy is comprised of different levels

of understanding, which consider the way in which students are required to establish connections between different components of knowledge and apply them to untaught applications through abstraction coincides with the views of New London Group (see subchapter 2.1.) on multimodality and multiliteracies and how important it is to be capable of finding links between different literacies and modes. I will now proceed with a brief description of each level of understanding in the context of this project:

<p><b>Pre-structural:</b> At this level there is no understanding. The student is unable to interpret and/or create a multimodal text. The bits of information which they possess are not connected and do not make any coherent sense and the student cannot interpret any of the different modes of meaning-making or apply multiliterate skills.</p> <p><b>Uni-structural:</b> The student's understanding is limited to just one or two literacies, focusing on only one mode of meaning-making.</p> <p><b>Multi-structural:</b> In this type of response, students are able to address a number of different modes of meaning-making and, consequently, use different types of literacy. However, they are unable to establish connections between them or understand how they connect to the whole.</p> <p><b>Relational:</b> At this level of understanding, students are able to make connections between interrelating modes of the multimodal text and integrate them into a whole, thus using different literacies in connection to one another.</p> <p><b>Extended abstract:</b> At the highest level of understanding, the student's understanding extends beyond the parameters of the multimodal text and they are able to, not only to make connections between different modes and literacies, but also to apply that knowledge to alternative contexts and think hypothetically and creatively.</p>
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Table 1: Criteria based on Biggs and Collis's (1982) SOLO taxonomy

Finally, I made use of a questionnaire (Appendix 4 & 6) at the end of both cycles in order to compare the results achieved with the students' perceptions on how effective this project had been. I found questionnaires to be efficient tools because "they are relatively easy to conduct, extremely versatile and uniquely capable of gathering a large amount of information quickly in a form that is readily processible" (Dörnyei, 2007, p.



101-102). To ensure the validity of these questionnaires, I included “clear instructions with relatively simple questions and relatively straightforward ways of answering them” (Bechhofer & Paterson, 2000, p. 74). Moreover, students were informed of the anonymity of the questionnaire, considering the fact that “respondents are more likely to complete it honestly than they might respond to questions in an interview, particularly if they can complete the survey anonymously” (Norton, 2009, p.91). There was also an effort to avoid certain mistakes such as double-barrelled items, which are items that possess more than one element, which may cause the students to agree with one and disagree with another; and leading questions, which are items that lead the respondent to answer a certain way (Norton, 2009).

For the purpose of both questionnaires I made use of a Likert Scale, which is used “to discover strength of feeling or attitude towards a given statement or series of statements” where “the higher the category chosen, the greater the strength of agreement” (Bell, 2005, p. 142), hence all items included are “attitudinal questions which are used to find out what people think” (Dörnyei, 2007, p.102). The questionnaire included a title; clear instructions including words in bold to draw students’ attention to important information, question items and a message at the bottom of the page thanking students for their collaboration (Bell, 2005). In regard to the question items, students were asked to choose one of 5 options. Thus, the aim of these questionnaires was to discern just how effective students considered the use of comic strips to be and whether or not they were useful tools for the promotion of literacies. I then cross-checked my findings by converting the results obtained into percentages and comparing them with the assessment of the students’ work and my reflections.

### III. First Cycle of the Action Research Project

In this chapter, I will present an overview of the activities employed in the first cycle of this action research project. For this purpose, I will provide a brief contextualization of the activities, in which I place them within the topics being discussed and the lesson in which they were carried out; and a description of the tasks performed by the students.

As mentioned before, all comic strips employed in this project were designed by me, except for one, which was obtained from *cartoonstock.com*. The activities that learners were instructed to do were also planned by me in accordance with the *Programa de Inglês nível continuação 10º, 11º e 12º* (2001) and the subject matters being discussed.

In carrying out this plan of action, I tried to be prepared for the unpredictable nature of this project, considering how important it was for the study that students produce their own discourse, voice their opinions and analyse the material in a subjective manner. For this reason, it was impossible for me to control the outcome and answers for each activity. Evidently, things rarely go precisely as expected. During this phase, new insights are extremely likely to be revealed, considering that the application of a project is extremely unpredictable. It was imperative to assume a flexible and adaptable attitude and incorporate minor deviations into the project in accordance with my experiences and feedback. Oftentimes, these changes had to be employed throughout the lesson and in the course of the activities, which was the biggest challenge, especially when I was presented with answers from the students and interpretations that had not crossed my mind at all even though I had designed the materials myself. In this context, I had to be spontaneous and comfortable enough to discuss these ideas in order to encourage students to elaborate on their thoughts.

#### 3.1. Contextualization of the activities

During the first cycle of my action research, I employed four different activities in five different lessons. All activities were inserted in a didactic unit entitled “Teenagers”. This theme delved into some cultural and social aspects related to being a teenager,

discussing the ways in which teenagers' lives have changed with the concomitant evolution of society, some of the problems they encounter nowadays and what kind of role they can have in the community. I will now proceed with a brief contextualization of each specific activity:

- Activity 1.1. (9<sup>th</sup> February) - the focus of this lesson was on helping students be more conscious of the pressures and struggles that they experience, the way in which those aspects influence their identity and how adults perceive these struggles. This lesson required the students to explore materials with a certain degree of abstraction, including the interpretation of an allegorical video and a poem.
- Activity 1.2. (21<sup>st</sup> February) – the objectives of this lesson consisted of identifying some of the qualities that make someone a good role model and a good global citizen, to raise awareness of the fact that teens can make a difference in their community and to help learners understand the importance of optimism. This lesson required a certain degree of personalization and the values, opinions and views of students were the main focus in all discussions which led to the activity in question.
- Activity 1.3. (23<sup>rd</sup> February) – this lesson focused on some of the serious issues that affect teenagers nowadays, with a slight focus on bullying and how to deal with bullies, as a victim or a witness. Modal verbs were also reviewed in context with the topic. In this lesson, different multimodal texts were used in all activities employed (posters, video and comic strips) and students were encouraged to decode their meaning with class discussions, which provided them with the language they needed to acquire and apply.
- Activity 1.4. (28<sup>th</sup> February) – in this lesson, students explored the importance of volunteer work. Most activities were particularly dynamic, as they included pair work or group work. Moreover, students were asked to explore different types of volunteer jobs and projects as well as reflect on the advantages of volunteering and on their own experiences.

As mentioned before, all these activities were carried out at the end of the lesson after students were given the opportunity to acquire and recycle the language they would need to use subsequently. All lessons included dynamic activities which allowed students to explore the vocabulary in context and to form their own opinions on the topics being discussed. For this reason, all lessons incorporated elements of personalization and the

production of personal discourse.

### **3.2. Description of the activities**

Activity 1.1. took place on 9<sup>th</sup> February and was part of a lesson which focused on teenage problems and how adults perceive these issues. For this activity, students were shown a comic strip (Appendix 8) in which two teenagers are depicted commenting on the fact that parents do not understand them. Considering that the main focus of this activity was on Speech, students were given a couple of minutes to look at the multimodal text and were instructed to pay close attention to the language being used and what they thought to be unusual. Through the analysis of the Speech used in this comic strip, students were simultaneously exploring the meaning of the material and relating the subject matter to their own lives. It is pertinent to mention that this particular comic strip included a number of linguistic techniques that were extremely relevant to the message of the multimodal text and it is clear that its verbal mode was the most powerful realm of meaning-making in this particular comic strip.

Taking into account the fact that Kress (2000) believes that attention should be drawn to individual modes and the particular ways in which they make meaning (see subchapter 2.1.), the objective of activity 1.1. was to draw students' attention to the linguistic mode so they can be prepared to understand each individual mode before exploring their connection.

On 21<sup>st</sup> February 2018, activity 1.2. was carried out. After reflecting on the importance of optimism and on how hope does not imply that we should close our eyes to the problems that affect our society but, on the contrary, requires us to acknowledge those issues while believing it is worth fighting for a better world with kindness and tolerance, students were presented with a comic strip (Appendix 9), which contained only one panel. The illustration of the comic strip was metaphorical and depicted different ways that we may choose to solve our problems when faced with obstacles in our path. Thus, students were asked to interpret the metaphors depicted in the comic strip and what each object that is hung on a wall means in the context of overcoming setbacks. After about 5 minutes, a class discussion followed, in which students were encouraged to voice

their interpretations. There were no right or wrong answers and the aim was for students to produce individual discourse and to apply their own values and ideas to the analysis of the multimodal text. Thus, the activity was more learner-centred and self-controlled, fostering their critical thinking and visual interpretation skills. Concomitantly, the goal was to draw students' attention to the visual and spatial modes of comic strips in its Illustration, hence the minimal use of verbal text.

Afterwards, students were asked to apply the information they had gathered from the comic strip and apply it to a real life situation. Therefore, in a class discussion, students were instructed to come up with a problem and to choose one of the possible solutions represented in the comic strip, creating a situation in which someone surpasses an obstacle in life by taking a certain measure. Thus, learners were asked to apply abstract concepts to a more concrete situation that they could experience.

Regarding activity 1.3, as mentioned before, in this lesson students discussed the topic of teenage problems with a more evident focus on bullying, and reviewed some grammar related to modal verbs. Before the activity in question, learners watched a video which led to a discussion about how important it is to stand up to bullies, assist victims of bullying and be open to becoming friends with people who are different from us as it is enriching and educational to interact with people who have different views, interests and even cultures. They thereupon reviewed the grammatical item in context with the topic. Finally, students were presented with a comic strip (Appendix 10) with empty speech balloons. After a brief discussion which led students to understand that a situation is being depicted in which someone comes to the defence of a victim of bullying, they were asked to complete the speech bubbles using at least three modal verbs so the narrative would make sense. This exercise was carried out with the whole class and all students were encouraged to contribute. This activity went a step further from the ones employed in previous lessons which focused on individual modes. The aim of activity 1.4. was not only to make students creators but also to focus on all modes of meaning-making and establish connections among them in order to attain a more comprehensive understanding of multimodal texts. Firstly, they were asked to interpret the visual and spatial modes (illustration), then they were asked to pay close attention to the type of language they were using as they had rules by which they had to abide (Speech) and, most

importantly, their attention was drawn very closely to the connection between these elements as they were asked to analyse the image in order to produce text that was congruent with the illustration while conveying a message about the topic of bullying (Content).

Finally, activity 1.4. was carried out on 28<sup>th</sup> February. This lesson delved into the topic of volunteerism. After identifying different types of volunteer jobs and discussing the advantages of this type of work, students were divided into groups of 5 and asked to imagine a volunteer project they would want to start. They were instructed to identify the specifics of their project, how it would be executed and name it. Afterwards, all groups presented their projects while other students deliberated over each one of them. Finally, all students voted for their favourite project and the most voted was used in activity 1.4. In this context, students were informed that they would create a comic strip which aimed to convince people to take part in the volunteer project they had voted for and they were given a couple of minutes to discuss ideas in groups. They were subsequently encouraged to share their thoughts with the class and I ensured that all groups contributed to the discussion by asking each one of them to talk through some of the points they had discussed. They then proceeded to create the storyboard as a class with my assistance. I operated the web-based tool for the creation of the comic strip using the students' contributions while the whole process was being projected on the board as to facilitate the sharing of ideas.

All antecedent activities have been preparing students for the creation of the comic strip. Activity 1.3. already required a certain degree of creativity from the students; however, activity 1.4. took the production work a bit further and encouraged students to partake in a more complex representational process as encoders of meaning, as they were asked to create a multimodal text from scratch by making use of the information and language they had acquired and discussed in accordance with their own frameworks of knowledge.

### **3.3. Results**

In this chapter I will present the results obtained in the activities employed in the

first cycle of this project. Starting with activity 1.1, in which students took part in a class discussion regarding the analysis of a teacher-made comic strip (Appendix 8), these were the results:

Teacher: What are the two teenagers in this cartoon doing?

S: They are playing games, video games.

Teacher: And can you tell me what the boy in the red shirt is complaining about?

S: He's asking his friend if he thinks that parents don't understand them.

Teacher: And to what age group do these boys belong?

S: Our age, maybe?

S: They're teenagers.

Teacher: Yes. They're teenagers and they feel as if adults don't understand them at this age. So what kind of advice does his friend offer him?

SS: <silence>

Teacher: You don't understand what he is saying?

SS: No.

Teacher: Why not?

S: That is English?

S: It's how he's talking. It's strange. @ "You needs"?

SS: @@@@

Teacher: But do you understand all the words he used?

SS: Yes.

S5: Yes but I don't understand everything together.

S2: I understand him in the first balloon. He says that if he wants his parents to know what is happening... And I don't understand the rest.

Teacher: That's good. I will help you understand the rest then. As you said he's telling his friend that if he wants his parents to know what is going on then he needs to "clarify beyond da speculation". When do we need to speculate about something?

S5: When you don't know it?

Teacher: Exactly. And who's speculating here?

S5: The parents.

S6: Because they don't know what's going on!

Teacher: Exactly. So who needs to clarify the situation so parents don't have to speculate?

SS: Teenagers.

Teacher: Exactly. So can you tell what advice the boy in the blue shirt offers his friend now?

S: He's saying that he has to tell his parents what is happening in his life.

S: We need to talk to our parents.

Teacher: Why?

S: BECAUSE if they understand our lives then they will understand us too @

Teacher: That was deep and true. Let's move on to the parents in this comic. What is their reaction?

S: They're making fun of them.

S: They say they don't understand them.

Teacher: Why not?

S: Because they're parents? @

S: Probably for the same reason that we didn't understand what he was saying @

S: It ends in the same way it started! In the first... <L1>quadrado<L1>?

Teacher: Panel.

S: Panel, the teenager says parents don't understand them and in the last (.) panel, it's the same thing but it is the parents confirming they don't understand them.

Teacher: That's a good observation! It comes full circle. You mentioned that the parents didn't understand what the teenager was saying and neither did you at first. Let's go back to that. You said the language was strange.

SS: Yes.

Teacher: Why is it strange?

S: There are complicated words but also mistakes.

S: I think some mistakes like "da" and "goin'" are how they say them how they pronounce the words.

Teacher: Absolutely! We've talked about this. What is one of the most important characteristics of the language of comic strips?

S: It is simple.

S: It's colloquial language.



Teacher: Exactly. So can you tell me some more informal words that you see in this comic?

S: “You needs”.

S: “Pops”.

S: “Dude”.

Teacher: Okay so this boy uses both complicated words and slang. I want you to think about your life as teenagers and try to understand how his language relates to how you feel as a teen.

S: It’s a contrast.

<silence>

Teacher: Yes... What type of contrast? What type of contrast do you experience in your lives at his age?

S: We’re growing up and our body and our mind is changing. We’re developing mentally and physically too and it’s hard.

S: And we said last lesson... we’re too young to do many things but we’re also too old to do others. I think that’s the contrast.

S: Yes. Sometimes we feel like children, sometimes we feel like adults.

Teacher: Very good. So what do you think his language symbolizes then, in light of what you just said?

S: The difficult words are our adult side and the errors are our young side.

Table 2: Transcription of class discussion carried out in activity 1.1.

In the second activity of the 1<sup>st</sup> cycle, students also partook in a class discussion in the analysis of a comic strip containing only one panel (Appendix 9) and connected to the topic of optimism and how to overcome obstacles. I will now present the results:

Teacher: This teenager is facing some troubles in his life. Each one of these objects symbolize a different solution for his problems. I want you to use your imagination and tell me what kind of solution they symbolize.

S: Suicide!

Teacher: Suicide? Why do you say that?

S: He’s going to use the chair to hang himself, the <L1>pá<L1> is to dig his grave and

the wings (.) he will become an angel after he dies.

Teacher: What about the hammer?

S: ... I don't know.

Teacher: Even though the hammer seems to be out of place, your interpretation was smart. I hadn't thought of it.

S: @ It was the first thing that came to my mind when I saw it.

Teacher: All answers are valid if you have a good explanation, so does anyone have a different interpretation of it? Let's start with the hammer.

S: I think it's solving the problem.

S: It's when you confront the problem. You take an active role and you learn about the problem so you can destroy it.

Teacher: Okay. So when you actually address the problem and take measures to actually solve it.

S: Yes! So you go "through" the problem. You confront it. And you don't run away from it.

Teacher: You solve it instead of avoiding it. Anyone else?

S: Yes! I think it is about violence. It's when you use violence to solve the problem.

Teacher: So destroying the wall means resorting to violence. Why?

S: Because hitting with the hammer is aggressive.

Teacher: Good job. Let's move on to the next object. What do the wings mean?

S: I think it symbolizes overcoming the problem and being optimistic.

S: I think it's about choosing the right way to solve a problem, the moral way.

Teacher: "When they go low, we go high". That's what Michelle Obama says.

S: Exactly. It's about rising "above".

Teacher: So doing the right thing. Very good. And what about the shovel?

S: Going to the roots of the problem.

Teacher: Finding the source of the problem and putting an end to it?

S: Yes. You find the source of the problem and you solve it.

S: I think it is being pessimistic. Going "under" and staying in the dark.

S: Or just doing the wrong thing. The opposite of rising above. It's the dirtiest way but the easiest.

Teacher: Both are good ideas. Let's move on to the last one: the chair.

S: You sit on the chair and wait for a solution to fall from heaven. Not doing anything to solve the problem.

Teacher: So for you it symbolizes being passive and refusing to confront your problems?

S: Yes. It's when you just give up.

Teacher: Good. Does someone have a different idea?

S: I think it could be about coping. When you stop to reflect and to cope with the problem.

Teacher: So it's not permanent. It's taking a break.

S: Maybe. Or if you actually took some time to cope with the problem, it would be solved and you wouldn't have to do anything else.

Teacher: Coping. That's a very good hunch. So now that you've discussed your ideas, I want you to imagine a real life problem that this boy in the Comic has and choose a solution to his problem from the ones we've talked out. So what's the problem?

S: Bullying!

Teacher: Bullying. And what's the solution?

S: Rising above!

S: Breaking through!

Teacher: Okay, we can do both. What does the boy do to overcome his problem with bullying by rising above?

S: He chooses to be a better person than the bullies.

Teacher: How?

S: Maybe he talks to someone and he doesn't react with violence or anything like that.

Teacher: Very good. And what if he chooses to break through instead?

S: He faces the bullies and confronts them.

Table 3: Transcription of class discussion carried in activity 1.2.

In activity 1.3, students were finally included in the process of creating multimodal texts and encoding meaning, starting by adding some dialogue to a wordless comic strip. I will now present the results:



Figure 1: Teacher-made comic strip with added dialogue by the students

Finally, in activity 1.4, students created their own comic strip about the topic of volunteerism. Here is the student-made multimodal text:



Figure 2: Comic strip created by students in activity 1.4.

### 3.4. Interpretation of the results

#### 3.4.1 Activity 1.2.

Overall, activity 1.1. was successful and the students achieved results beyond what

I expected. They showed interest and eagerness to participate in the class discussion, which seems to corroborate the motivational nature of comic strips as teaching tools. They did encounter some difficulties but were able to overcome them with my guidance, proving that establishing a dialogic teacher/students relationship dynamic is truly advantageous with regard to the stimulation of the students' thought process. The fact that they were able to reach conclusions so quickly after being provided with only a few prompting questions shows that these students are more than capable of proficiently decoding meaning from a multimodal text. They only need to be pushed beyond the parameters of monomodality and with practice they should be able to be more autonomous interpreters of meaning.

In terms of print literacy, while reading the speech used in the text, students struggled to understand the type of language but eventually reached their conclusions through my guidance. Judging by their utterances, I assume they found the contrast between informal and formal language to be confusing. Although they were able to understand all words in the comic strip, they failed to link them and interpret meaning. This relates to their pragmatic competence and the fact that, as learners, students are still developing skills related to the interpretation of utterances which are not clear and straightforward (see section 2.3.2.). Instead, this comic strip purposely plays with words to create an indirect meaning. Furthermore, it incorporates language that is informal and colloquial, which students are not as familiar with, as they are not immersed in the culture of English speaking countries where this type of language emerges. This relates to Csabay's (2016) views on how the understanding of certain expressions requires a certain cultural awareness of the target language. However, even faced with difficulties, students reached their own conclusions with my guidance, being able to read the linguistic features in a communicative context. This understanding of the contextual nature of the language is one of the most important abilities in regard to print literacy (Purcell-Gates et al, 2004).

In terms of critical literacy, although students were able to analyse the content of the comic successfully and understood the message it conveyed, I believed their thoughts on the topic could be more elaborate and most of their answers regarding the relationship were on a surface level and required a lot of guidance from me, which defeats the purpose of self-controlled thinking in critical literacy. However, as mentioned by Freire (2005), a

dialogic teacher/student relationship dynamic is of utmost importance for the development of critical literacy and it is also true that some comments showed good critical thinking, especially when students commented on the parallel between the contrast of the teenager's language and their conflicting feelings at that age.

At first, it was pretty clear that students were at a uni-lateral level. They were definitely able to acquire pieces of information from their interpretation of the visual and spatial modes of the Comic but the linguistic mode hindered their understanding of the material. In this case, the linguistic mode carried the most relevant set of meanings so they were limited to their visual literacy skills. However, they were able to expand on their thought process during the course of the activity. They quickly achieved the relational level when a student commented on how the Comic had started in the similar manner in which it had started, thus making connections between the spatial and linguistic mode / print literacy and visual literacy; and by the end of the activity students were able to reach the extended abstract level by transporting the information they had acquired from the text and transporting it into their own lives.

### **3.4.2. Activity 1.2.**

The results for this activity were extremely positive and there was a significant improvement. Students were evidently more engaged in the activity and their contributions were opportune and creative. I identified three reasons that may have contributed to this improvement. Firstly, it is evident that students improve when they practice. As new activities are employed, they gain experience and develop skills, which helps them achieve better results in the analysis of multimodal texts. After all, that was the aim of this project. Secondly, I assume this improvement was directly connected to the motivational nature of the topic. Students were more willing to talk about optimism and overcoming setbacks in life than discussing problems regarding the generational gap. And finally, this activity had minimal linguistic features and focused on visual stimuli, which seems to pique students' interest as well.

As mentioned before, I created this comic strip so I had some preconceived ideas about the meaning of each object depicted, albeit I was fully aware that students could

very well interpret the text in a different manner and I remained accepting of each one of their hunches as there were really no right and wrong answers, as long they were properly justified. However, I was really taken aback when a student suggested suicide. I found it interesting that the student mentioned that it was the first thing he thought of as he looked at the comic strip. This idea was not the product of a careful analysis, but a first impression. Although I had not considered it, I can now understand why his thoughts led him in that direction because of the visual impact of the comic strip. However, the linguistic features of the multimodal text could not corroborate his interpretation and the student only focused on the visual stimuli. Firstly, the phrase “Please select one of these items” implies that each object symbolizes a different action and the word “sit” in reference to the chair does not make sense in the context of suicide. As Jacobs (2013) mentions, reading comics requires “learning how to make meaning from the convergence of text and image” (p. 3), thus using both visual and print literacy. For this reason, I believe this interpretation is at a uni-structural level. The student was able to make use of his visual literacy skills, and, in fact, he was creative and imaginative, but he did not interpret the written word or establish connections between different modes.

However, as the discussion continued, all suggestions were based on a successful combination between the minimal linguistic features and the illustration. Students offered different interpretations and decoded meaning in different manners; however, all ideas were well justified.

In terms of the analysis of the visuals, students used their visual literacy skills successfully by being able to draw meaning from the symbolism of the visual presentation and analysing it critically and in light of real life situations ” (Stokes, 2001).

Concomitantly, I found it interesting that the students applied the words used in the comics in their discourse on several occasions, using phrases such as “rising above” and “breaking through”, which shows the efficient use of print literacy skills by successfully decoding the symbolism of these words and subsequently using them for a communicative purpose. (Purcell-Gates et al, 2004).

For this reason, students were at an extend abstract level. They were able to make connections between different modes, make use of interrelating literacy skills and apply these frameworks of information into real life situation, translating symbolism into

realism successfully and with minimal help from the teacher. They were able to perform the task as proficient critical thinkers, using self-controlled thinking and personal discourse as well as a high awareness of the subject matter.

However, it is pertinent to mention that not all students were provided with the opportunity to participate and only some of them offered contributions; therefore, it is impossible to claim whether all students achieved the same level of understanding.

### **3.4.3. Activity 1.3.**

The results of this activity were not as satisfactory as the last one. However, we must take into consideration the fact that this was the first time students went from just decoders of meaning to both decoders and encoders of meaning and it was to be expected that they would encounter some difficulties. In this context, I believe students achieved a relational level of understanding.

In terms of visual literacy, they were able to interpret the illustration successfully and autonomously by creating meaning from the visual, gestural and spatial modes of the multimodal text. Thus, they immediately concluded that the location depicted in this Comic was a school and, judging by the facial expressions and gestures of the characters, they understood that a pair of teenagers were mocking another girl and that this situation had displeased a fourth character, who decided to stand up to the bullies. This ability to generate meaning from non-verbal communication and spatial features is a visual literacy skill (Jacobs, 2013). Once more, I also draw on the ideas of Freire (2005) by claiming that the fact that students were able to analyse the situation and identify the depiction of a social issue is intrinsically related to the development of critical literacy.

However, in terms of print literacy, the language used was not particularly genuine or realistic, as they used sentences such as “she should have better legs”. In fact, it was clear that students were not taking the topic very seriously as they performed the task and many jokes emerged. This is actually very normal as students were struggling to view this situation as a real-life problem and were not relating it to their own lives either. Moreover, they were very focused on the use of the grammatical item, which also contributed to a lack of focus on the communicative purpose of the language.



Due to these problems and the distance from realism, I believe students did not quite achieve an extended abstract level of understanding. However, they were still able to use their visual literacy skills successfully, only struggling slightly when it came to critical and print literacy. Moreover, the text made perfect sense, the story was coherent and the linguistic features were articulated with the visual modes of the multimodal text, hence I assessed their level of understanding as relational.

#### **3.4.4. Activity 1.4.**

There was definitely an improvement when comparing the results for activities 1.4. and 1.5. Students showed signs of engagement and interest and were definitely more committed to achieving the best results.

In terms of print literacy, the language was very simple and there was room for some improvement; however, students made an active effort to employ language that was communicative and genuine, making use of interjections and exclamations (curiously, all sentences in the comic strip are exclamations). There was also the inclusion of barking sounds, which added to the comical nature of the text and a wordplay, as students used “4” as a replacement for “for”. I believe that the fact that they felt as if they were not imposed any rules in terms of the language they had to use, which did not happen in the previous activity where students were instructed to use modal verbs, allowed them to create more genuine language. In fact, according to the views of Purcell-Gates et al (2006) on print literacy, students as creators of meanings come through in “the insistence on meaning over accuracy, process over product” (p. 71).

There was also a clear attention to detail when it came to the visual representation of the comic strip. In the first panel, students insisted on including an “abandoned shack”, which aimed to convey a sense of abandonment and sadness. This use of metaphorical visual features is connected to visual literacy skills as students learn to make comparisons and analogies (Elkins, 2009). There was also the inclusion of the dog bowl as a decoration for the premises of the charitable organization and the dogs watching the race on the benches, which also contributed to the comical nature of the multimodal text.

Moreover, in terms of the creation of content, I also found it important that students

chose to add a line to the comics, which corroborated the importance of the volunteer project in a natural and genuine manner that did not feel contrived or out of place (“We can give these animals a better life”), even if it felt a bit simplistic. The project was also realistic, feasible, connected to a very real issue and it was connected to some ideas that we had discussed concerning the fact that one does not need to do grand things to make a difference in the world. They also performed the task autonomously and did not exhibit an overreliance on my help. All of this showed an efficient use of critical thinking skills.

The story was also coherent and although there were some significant jumps from one panel to another, there was always some connection between them and all modes were properly interweaved, as students proved to be multiliterate in the use of all different types of literacy. For this reason, I believe their level of understanding was extended abstract and showed significant improvement from the previous exercise.

#### **3.4.5. Questionnaires**

I will now present the results of the questionnaires employed in the first cycle (Appendix 5) as well as make connections between them and the assessment of the students’ work. Question A was connected to multimodal literacies. Students were asked whether the articulation between image and text had potentialized the use of the language. 50% partially agreed, 34,6% agreed completely, 11,5% felt indifferent and 3,8% partially disagreed. These results are positive and in line with my assessment of students’ work. I do believe that students became increasingly comfortable with the use of multiple modes of making meaning and used them in an interrelating manner to support the use of language. This ability to connect modes became increasingly easier for students, as I have pointed out before. By activity 1.4, students achieved an extended abstract level of understanding with little difficulty and were more than capable of connecting all modes to a whole.

Item B referred to visual literacy, where students were asked whether images had helped them convey messages in a more efficient manner. 46% partially agreed, 42,3% completely agreed, 3,8% felt indifferent and the last 3,8% disagreed completely. Once again, the results were positive as the clear majority believe that the illustration of comic

strips is an efficient mode of meaning-making for them. In fact, in all activities, students showed minimal difficulties when it came to the use of visual literacy skills and were always able to use them in an effective as both encoders and decoders. From the very positive results achieved in activity 1.2, which required the use of visual literacy skills, to the utilization of visuals as a way to convey symbolism and humour in activity 1.4, students felt at ease when working with visuals. For this reason, I believe the use of this type of multimodal text was a useful tool for the promotion of visual literacy.

In item D was related to print literacy, students were asked whether they thought the colloquial language used in comic strips had helped them interiorize the type of language that is used in real life situations. 57,7% completely agreed, 26,9% partially agreed, 7,7% disagreed partially and 3,8% felt indifferent. It is clear that students felt as if comic strips had been particularly effective at providing them with them opportunity to read and write genuine language in a communicative manner. This coincides with my thoughts on their improvement in this particular aspect, as I believed that by each exercise, students became more and more proficient at reading and using colloquial language. Students seemed to struggle more evidently when it came to language, especially in activity 1.1. where they were asked to interpret a text, which, as mentioned before, contained language that requires cultural awareness of the target language. There was also a significant improvement when comparing results from activity 1.3. and 1.4, as the language used in the latter is much genuine and less contrived that the one used in the former.

Item E referred to critical literacy. Students were asked whether they thought the narrative nature of the comic strips had helped understand in a critical manner the context in which the target language was used. 38,5% agreed completely, 34,6% partially agreed, 15,4% felt indifferent, 3,8% disagreed partially and the last 3,8% disagreed completely. The results are still positive; however, they were more varied. In fact, in terms of critical literacy, I felt that the best results were achieved in activity 1.2, as students were able to analyse the symbolic elements of the comic and draw meaning from them, applying the information they had gathered to real life situations, which are critical literacy skills, according to Freire (2005) or Masduqi. However, in other activities, although results were still positive, there was still room for improvement, considering that students approached the social topics discussed at a less profound manner.

Finally, in item C, students were asked whether the use of comic strips had motivated them. 34,6% agreed partially, 30,8% felt indifferent, 26,9% agreed completely and 3,8% disagreed completely. Once again, results are varied. I believe that these results point to the fact that students all have different preferences with regard to pedagogical tools. Although comic strips may seem fun and engaging for most, some may not share the same opinion. However, it is pertinent to mention that, even if many students did not find this type of text particularly motivating, the vast majority agree that comic strips are an effective teaching tool for the promotion of multimodal literacies.

## **IV. Second Cycle of Action Research Project**

In this chapter I will provide an overview of the activities implemented in the second cycle of the action research project. In this cycle, minor changes were made in order to increase the effectiveness of the plan of action.

One of the most important aims of this Action Research Project was to engage students in challenging activities, which allowed them to become designers of meaning by learning how to decode and encode messages through the use of multimodal texts (see chapter I). For this reason, it was always a priority to encourage learners to produce individual discourse and use their own schemata of knowledge in the application and acquisition of multiliteracies. In this context, upon observing how well students responded to the use of comics and how eager they were to partake in class discussions and exchange views, I decided to increase the level of challenge of the activities and make them even more learner-centred and self-controlled. In this context, I decided to incorporate some changes into the project which allowed students to be more autonomous and rely less on my guidance. However, it was important to maintain the dynamic nature of these activities and to promote communication, not only to stimulate the learners' interest and to serve as a source of motivation, but also because all literacies are developed more efficiently through language, interaction and exchange of ideas and considering that we were in an EFL classroom, language should always be at the centre of all activities implemented.

For this reason, instead of class discussions led by me as a teacher, during the second cycle of this project, students were engaged in activities which included group and pair work. This type of activities also allowed all students to participate in the performance of the tasks, considering that in the first cycle, not all students had the opportunity to contribute during class discussions.

I still guided students' work and provided them with all the help they needed; however, while in the first cycle, I had a stronger presence and influence in the work they were developing by engaging in dialogues with them and offering contributions that oftentimes served as prompts, in the second cycle, the role of the teacher was to be a facilitator and provide guidance only when needed. The aim was to provide students with

all the tools and knowledge they would need to partake in more autonomous activities where they were given the opportunity to apply the language and information they had acquired and worked on.

In this context, most activities were extremely similar to the ones employed in the first cycle. One of the only deviations was that students were required to have a more comprehensive understanding of multimodal texts, hence activities in which the focus was on only one of the modes were not included and students were expected to already be able to differentiate these individual modes without being explicitly told to do so and understand their correlation in the meaning making process. Moreover, the nature of these activities was one that promoted creativity and more production. Therefore, while in the first cycle, students were predominantly decoders of meaning, in the second cycle, they became mainly encoders of meaning. Not only does this increase the level of challenge in terms of the application of multiliteracies but it also leads students to become even more aware of how different modes convey meaning by making use of them as means of expression.

It is also important to mention that all activities were employed at the end of the lesson, similar to what happened in the first cycle. For this reason, throughout the lesson, students were able to acquire and work on the target language and knowledge in more controlled activities and then engage in a freer task which allowed them to apply this knowledge and language in accordance with their own opinions and understanding of the topic.

### **5.1.Contextualization of the activities**

The activities employed during this cycle were included within the theme of “Technology”. This topic was particularly pertinent when considering the fact that this is class of students from the area of engineering. In the field of engineering, technology consists of a collection of artefacts which play an essential role in its practice. For this reason, discussing this subject matter and its implications on society is distinctly appropriate to be discussed by this group of students. The context of each one of the three activities that were employed is as follows:

- Activity 2.1. (9<sup>th</sup> May 2018) – this lesson fits into the theme of “Space Exploration”, more specifically the prospect of extra-terrestrial life. The aim was to lead students to understand the many uses of space exploration, to raise awareness of the types of technology that have been used in attempts to contact extra-terrestrial life, to discuss whether or not students believed in the existence of beings from other planets and if so, to consider the pros and cons of making contact. In this context, most activities were dynamic and class discussions were conducted, many prompted by visual aids, such as posters and the Pioneer Plaques (a pair of plaques that were placed on board of two space probes in case they were ever found by extra-terrestrials). These communicative activities, which were extremely motivating and increased participation, led students to work on the language related to space exploration.
- Activity 2.2. (11<sup>th</sup> May 2018) – in this lesson, we continued discussing topics related to space exploration; however, we moved from extra-terrestrial life to earthly life as we delved into the daily lives of astronauts living in the International Space Station. Students watched several videos about how life in space differs from life on Earth, in which astronauts who are stationed in the International Space Station explained how they performed daily tasks, such as cooking and washing their hair. These videos led to subsequent discussions about life in space and what it entails, surviving the extreme conditions which astronauts are subjected to, the struggles they face when returning to Earth and the importance of these people's work.
- Activity 2.3. (23<sup>rd</sup> May 2018) – this lesson revolved around the topic of Virtual Reality Technology. The main aim was to lead students to understand why and how virtual reality technology is gaining prominence, to raise awareness of the advantages and disadvantages of this type of technology and to understand how it impacts people's lives. Most activities personalized the topic and led students to recognize the presence of futuristic technology in their own lives and its prospective uses and discussions were prompted by visual aids as to help students perceive this type of technology as a reality instead of an abstract concept or a vague idea in their heads.

It is also pertinent to add that these activities were all carried out at the last stage of the lesson. Similar to the strategy employed in the first cycle, students were presented with dynamic activities, very frequently complemented with visual stimuli, which helped

them become more familiar with the language as well as establish connections between verbal and visual representation of certain concepts, artefacts and objects. These methods aimed to facilitate the acquisition of the language and information that they would later need for the activities aforementioned as visuals promote memory retention and help learners having access to information that would otherwise be left to their imagination. Thus, their understanding of the language is refined and more comprehensive, which helps students apply it more efficiently, especially with comic strips, where they also need to make use of the visual dimension of the meaning making process.

## **5.2. Description of activities**

On 9<sup>th</sup> May 2018, activity 2.1. was employed at the end of a lesson which delved into topics related to space exploration and alien life. After a discussion in which students were asked whether or not they would like to meet an alien and, if so, what they would like to say to them, they were divided into groups of 4 and handed an incomplete Comic Strip (Appendix 11) whose balloons were blank. Before being instructed to do the activity, students were asked prompting questions which led them to understand that the text depicted a situation in which a human and an alien communicate. Finally, they were asked to fill in the blank balloons so that the narrative would make sense. They were also encouraged to use the language that they had been working on throughout the lesson. During the activity, I moved around the room, monitoring the activity, asking students about their progress and helping them when needed. Finally, when the activity was finished, I collected their work.

This task was in many ways similar to activity 1.4. It required students to be both encoders and decoders of meaning, as they were asked to interpret the illustration and then add text that could be congruent with what they perceived the image to be in regard to its visual, gestural and spatial modes. Moreover, it also necessitated a high awareness of the connection between the various realms of meaning making as they were also led to establish connections between the different modes in order to produce a coherent narrative, thus making it a multimodal text. However, activities 1.4. and 2.1. differed in the sense that the former was a class activity in which there was only one final product,



whereas the latter was about group work and it provided students with the opportunity to be more autonomous and more active participants in the activity, considering that a group of 4 people facilitates the contribution of all members.

Activity 2.2. took place on 18<sup>th</sup> May 2018. The lesson was taught in a computer room and focused on the daily lives of the crew of the International Space Station. Before the activity, students took part in a class discussion in which they were asked whether they thought it was difficult for astronauts to readapt to life on Earth after living in space for such long periods of time. They were reminded of how different life conditions were in space and thereupon led to understand that it is extremely difficult, both physically and mentally, to return to Earth, as they were given the example of an astronaut who, upon his return, struggled to speak because he could feel the weight of his tongue due to increased gravity. They were then shown a comic strip (Appendix 11) in which a mother and daughter speak about the father, who had just come back from an International Space Station expedition after living in space for 197 days. Afterwards, students were divided into groups of 5. After a brief discussion, in which students talked about what they thought was happening in the Comic, they were instructed to imagine what happened after the conversation between mother and daughter took place and create one panel on *Storyboardthat* to conclude the story. The aim for the activity was for students to picture a situation in which the father, who is still adapting to life on Earth, is doing something strange that shocks his family. It is pertinent to mention that it was the first time that students were using the web-based tool to create comics, as I was the one operating it in activity 1.5. However, they were still familiar with how the website worked, considering that they were able to watch me use it during the first cycle.

Similar to activity 2.1., this task employs both input and output strategies, as students are asked to interpret an open-ended comic strip of three panels and then create a fourth one, which draws the story to a close. Thus, they are required to apply the language and knowledge they have acquired as both interpreters and conveyors of meaning.

Finally, on 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2018, activity 2.3. was carried out in a lesson which delved into the topic of Virtual Reality Technology. Before the activity took place, students were asked to come up with their own possibilities of virtual reality technology that they think

would be useful and/or fun, individually. After having reflected on the topic individually, students were divided into groups of 5. They were then asked to discuss their ideas regarding different possibilities of virtual reality technology and choose the one they consider the most useful. Finally, students were instructed to do activity 2.3. in which they had to create a comic strip, using the website storyboard.com once again, displaying the virtual reality that they had chosen. The class was informed that the comic strip should depict a narrative that clarified how the technology worked, what it aimed to do and why it was needed. As students created their comics, I moved around the room clarifying doubts when needed and checking on each group's progress.

In this activity, the approach used consists of an output strategy, as students are encouraged to generate sets of meaning through the creation of a multimodal text, applying all the language and knowledge they have retained throughout the lesson. It also requires a higher degree of imagination and self-controlled thinking, considering that learners must create the story from scratch with the guidelines provided to them, as well as a more comprehensive awareness of the representational process. Students have to explore all individual modes (visual, spatial, gestural and linguistic) in order to convey meaning through their affordances while also taking into account the coherence of the narrative and the way in which all modes must come together in a harmonious manner. Thus, all literacies are being developed in the same manner in this activity.

### **5.3. Results**

In this section, I will provide the results achieved from the second cycle of this project. The work presented was done by three different groups. I will start by presenting three comic strips whose dialogue was added by the students in activity 2.1:

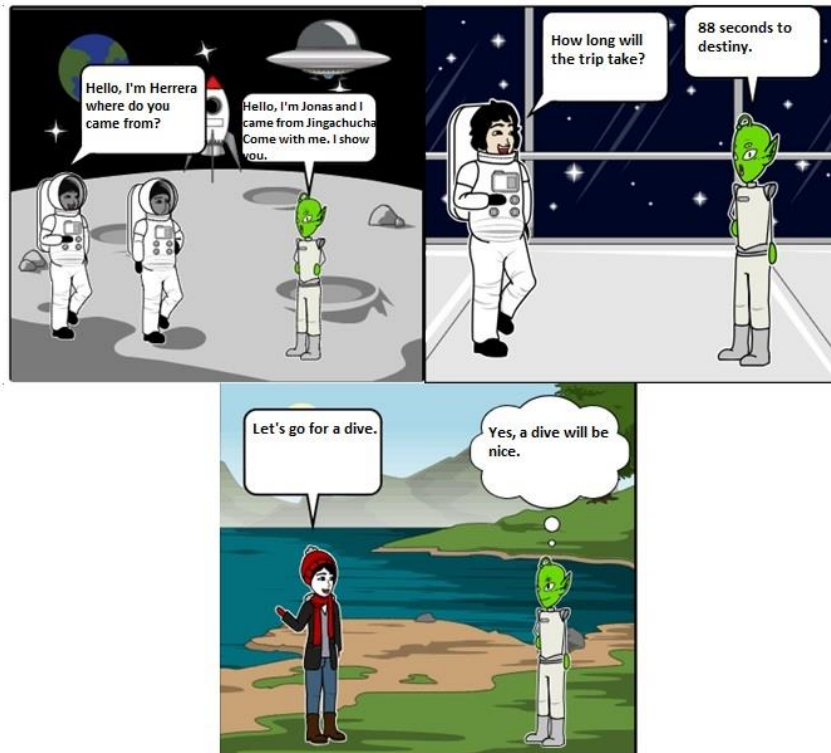


Figure 3: Teacher-made comic strip with added dialogue by Group 1

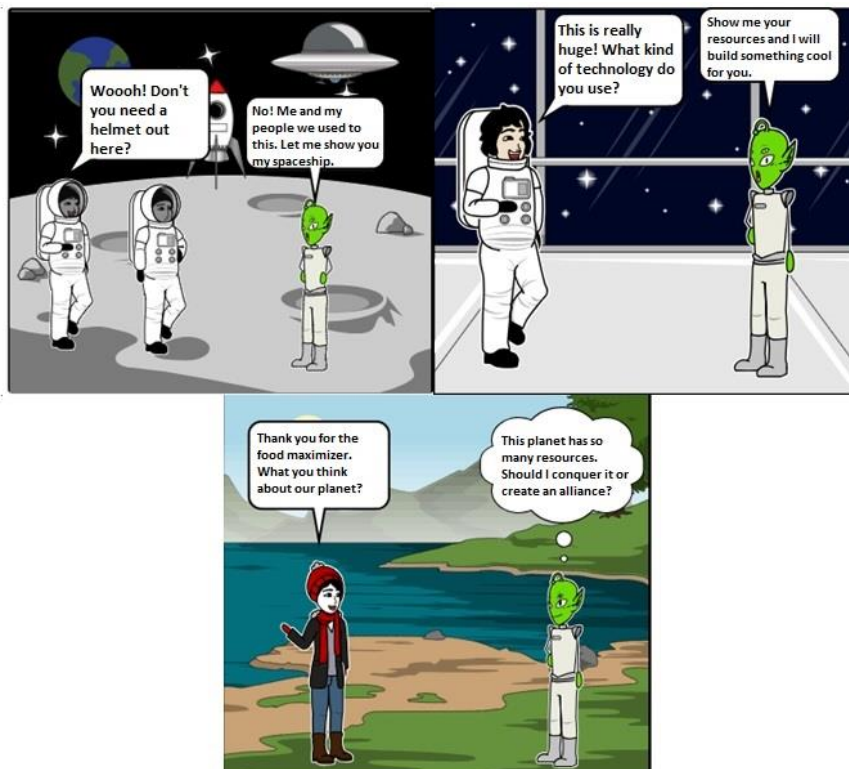


Figure 4: Teacher-made comic strip with added dialogue by Group 2

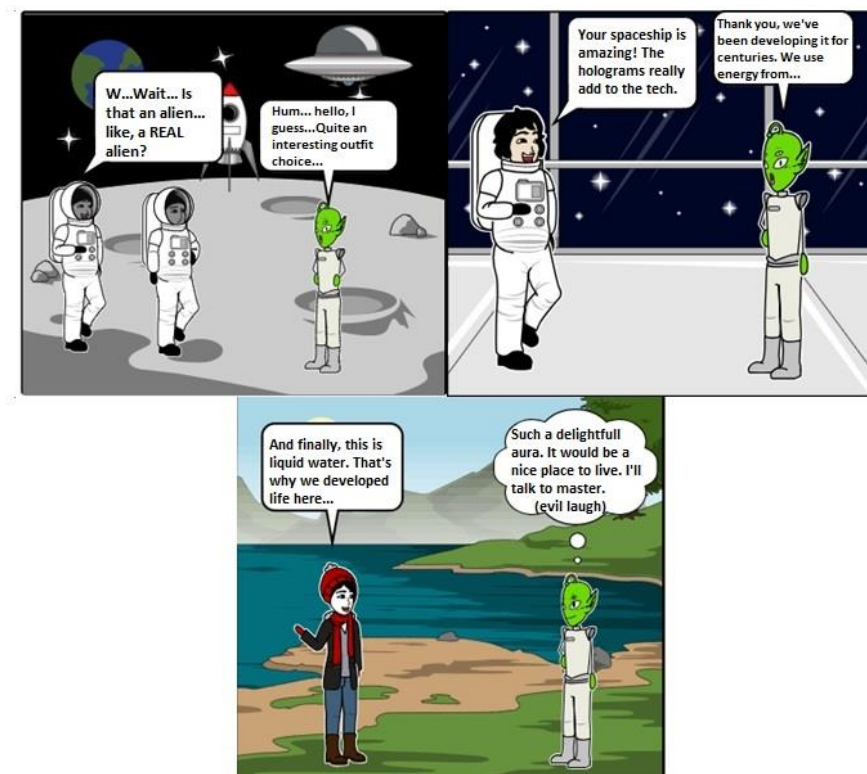


Figure 5: Teacher-made comic strip with added dialogue by Group 3

In this activity, students were asked to create their first comic strip to complete the one which was presented to them by the teacher. I will provide three of the student-made texts:

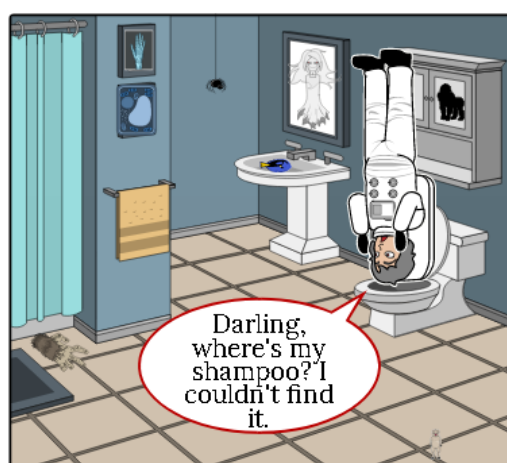


Figure 6: Comic strip created by Group 1 in activity 2.2.

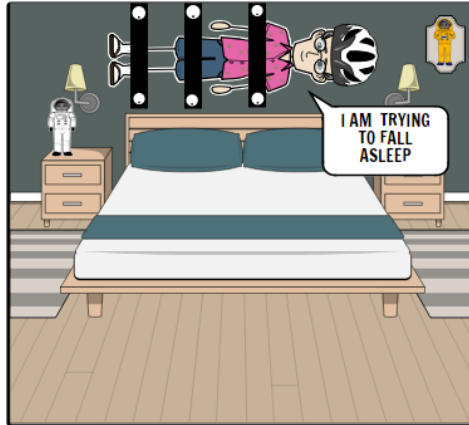


Figure 7: Comic strip created by Group 2 in activity 2.2.

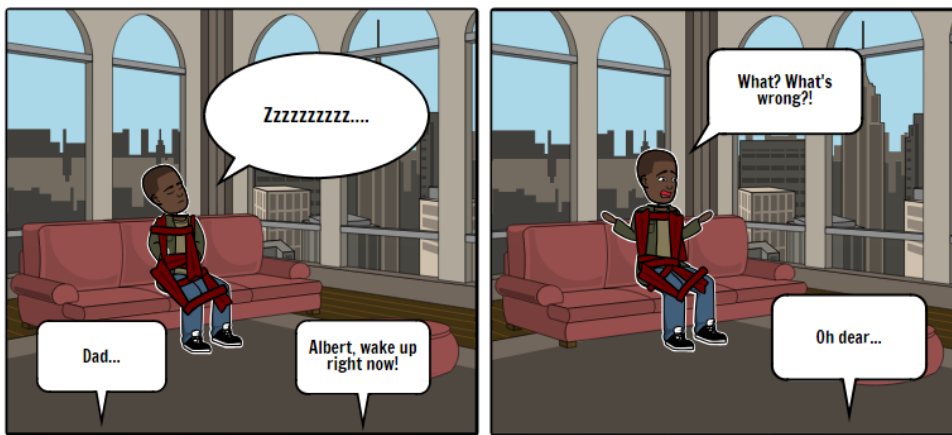


Figure 8: Comic strip created by Group 3 in activity 2.2.

Finally, in activity 2.3, students were instructed to create their own comic strips from scratch concerning the topic of technology. Below the reader may find three examples of the student-made multimodal texts which were produced:



Figure 9: Comic strip created by group 1 in activity 2.3.

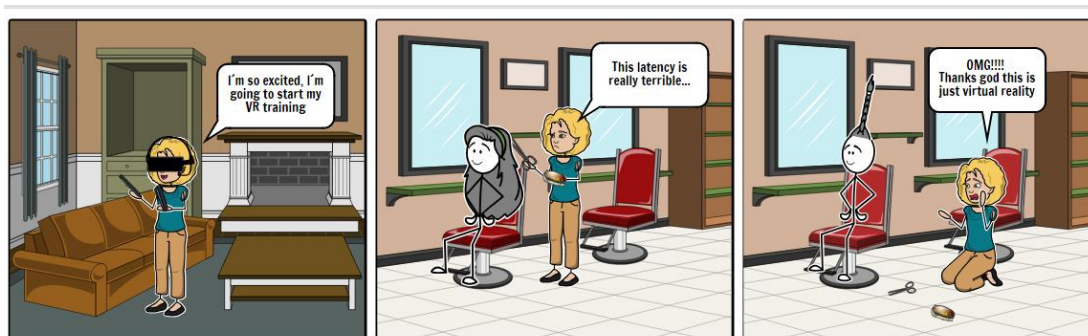


Figure 10: Comic strip created by Group 2 in activity 2.3.



Figure 11: Comic strip created by Group 3 in activity 2.3.

## 5.4. Interpretation of the results

### 5.4.1. Activity 2.1.

By and large, The results achieved in this activity were positive. Students were engaged and most tried using genuine language while also employing vocabulary that they had acquired during the lesson. However, the fact that I took a less active role in the completion of the comic strips was evident and while I was monitoring and checking on their progress, students asked me several questions which showed that they were a bit insecure in the interpretation of the visual presentation. Most frequently, I was asked about what planets were depicted in the comic strip, to which I replied that they could

choose whatever planet they wanted. At times, students would insist that I tell them, considering that I had created the comic strip and I reiterated the fact that there were no right or wrong answers and they were free to interpret the images however they liked as long as it made sense narratively. This showed that students were still insecure about using their multiliterate skills in a self-controlled activity.

I will now discuss the three examples which I provided in the previous section. With regard to Group 1, there were some issues related to different aspects. In terms of print literacy, the language used in the writing of speech is not exactly realistic or genuine and the characters' exchanges feel contrived and unnatural, especially in the first panel. There were also several errors in terms of grammar, verb tenses and interferences from the first language (for instance, the use of the word "destiny" instead of "destination"). However, they were still able to convey meaning, even if it is rather simplistic.

When it comes to visual literacy, it is clear that these students understood what was going on in the interpretation of the illustration. However, I found it interesting that in the last panel, the human character is wearing warm clothes, which implies that the weather is cold, and yet suggest they "go for a dive". One could argue that someone may still dive in the water even when the temperatures are low, but it is rather unusual. This shows a certain incongruity between the visual presentation and the verbal text.

In terms of content, these students did not really apply much of the information or language we had worked on during the lesson and were not able to convey a situation depicting any type of advantages or disadvantages of a potential encounter with extra-terrestrials. Considering how important it is to be able to use information in the creation of one's own discourse when it comes to critical literacy (Madedo, 2005), I would say that critical thinking skills could also be more developed.

In light of this, I would say this group is at a multi-structural level of understanding. They used their visual and print literacy skills, even if there was room for improvement, but they were not able to connect them to a whole and the connection between the visual and the verbal is incongruous at times.

Group 2 depicted a more realistic situation. Firstly, when interpreting the illustration, students noticed the fact that the human characters were using helmets, whereas the alien was not, taking advantage of that observation to start a conversation

which immediately created a contrast between both sides. In terms of speech, there is also an active effort to connect panels as students included language which led to the occurrences in the next panel. For instance, “Let me show you my spaceship” led the characters to the alien’s spaceship and “Show me your resources” led the characters to Earth in the last panel. For this reason, the narrative is coherent and congruent, showing appropriate use of print literacy (Saraceni, 2001), and the combination between the verbal features and the spatial and visual modes of meaning-making is well-organized. Consequently, it is safe to claim that these groups of students successfully interweaved their print and visual literacy skills. Moreover, there were some linguistic errors, but they did not hinder the understanding of the message which the comic strip conveys and there was an attempt to use genuine language, such as interjections and exclamations. In fact, the use of the sentence “what you think about my planet” may very well be an attempt to emulate colloquial speech, as fluent speakers tend to omit the auxiliary “do” when speaking.

Content-wise, the group was also able to successfully understand the possible benefits of an extraplanetary relationship, especially when it comes to technology, and depict them in the multimodal text. The mention of a “food maximiser” also showed awareness of useful technology that could be used for the improvement of our world. This social awareness great employment of critical thinking, which once again relates to Freire’s (2005) views on critical literacy.

Overall, I believe the level of understanding of these students is at an extended abstract level, as they were able to use their multiliterate skills in the analysis of the visual presentation, use of genuine language and by applying the information and vocabulary they had acquired and connecting them to a congruent whole in the creation of a creative final product.

Finally, Group 3 is at the highest degree of understanding. In terms, of print literacy, there was an attempt at using communicative and genuine language in the writing of speech, which was even more successful than what we saw with Group 2. Students made use of interruptions to convey confusion and surprise; exclamations which reiterated the admiration that one would feel when confronted with extra-terrestrial technology; and even visual techniques, such as “w-wait” to depict stuttering and capital



letter to emphasize words (see section 2.3.2), which demonstrates an efficient connection between visual and print literacy.

There was also an active effort to employ language that we had worked on during the lesson regarding the topic of technology and an effective application of the information and knowledge they had acquired into a new and creative product as well as a good analysis of the situation depicted, which coincides with Masduqi's (2006) views on critical literacy. Furthermore, students made use of humour, showing good pragmatic competences and a sense of being at ease with the language through the alien's inner monologue.

The only aspect in which Group 2 achieved better results was related to the coherence of the text. There was a more efficient attempt at making connections between panels in the previous comic strip, whereas in this one, the jumps between panels are more abrupt, even if we understand what is going on, showing worse results in terms of cohesion (see section 2.3.2.).

In spite of this minor weakness, and considering the use of humour, genuine language, efficient analysis and connection of all modes and the application of knowledge, I believe that the level of understanding of these students is extended abstract.

#### **5.4.2. Activity 2.2.**

In this activity, students used the web-based tool for the first time for the creation of the comic strip. For this reason, they were required to use a new set of skills related to digital literacy. In fact, students were very efficient in the use of these skills. Although they had only seen me use it once in the first cycle, they were quick to understand its affordances and my help was only necessary on rare occasions. One could expect the use of this tool to hinder their performance of the task but that was not the case and as the reader can see, students were able to use all features of the tool to change the characters' expressions, positions and to add certain objects that contributed to the representational process.

I will now analyse the three comic strips which I chose to use as an example of the students' work. Starting with Group 1, in terms of the design of the illustration,

students paid attention to the gestural mode of meaning-making of a comic strip and made sure the characters' body language made sense in the context of the occurrence. When it came to the creation of content, the idea is definitely humorous and creative, although not exactly realistic. These students attempted to show the former inhabitant of the International Space Station, washing his hair while levitating, which is something these students had witnessed on a video about life in space. However, it is hard to understand how he would float on Earth. However, there was an attempt to apply information which they had acquired from the lesson in their own content, which, according to Waters (2016), shows good use of analytical and critical thinking. Finally, in terms of the writing of speech, it was clear that students did not really focus on using verbal text. In fact, that was evident in all groups. However, this group still tried using genuine language with the employment of a vocative, which also adds to the humorous nature of their work.

With regard to Group 2, for the writing of speech, there was definitely a more apparent attempt at using genuine language with the use of vocatives; the imperative coupled with the expression "right now", which is normally used in direct speech in reference to an exact moment in time; an exclamation and even the use of "zzzzzzz" to refer to sleeping. Content-wise, the text was also comical, depicting the astronaut tied to the sofa, which is related to how astronauts tie down their sleeping bags, so they do not float away. Similar to what happened with Group 2, this group of students were able to understand just how different conditions are in space compared to life on Earth and depict it in a comical manner. Moreover, when it came to the design of the illustration, the use of non-verbal communication (gestures and body language) is also taken into account and used to convey meaning. By and large, this group uses all modes of meaning effectively, in an interrelated way and in context with the teacher-made comic strip.

Finally, Group 3 depicted a very similar situation to the previous one, as the astronaut ties himself to the wall to avoid floating away. With regard to speech, there is also minimal use of verbal text, as the students focused on the visual presentation of the text. In fact, the group did not even include punctuation and I am not sure whether the use of capital letter was an attempt at emphasizing his utterance and conveying loudness or an accidental use of this visual technique. However, I witnessed this group work especially hard in the visual presentation of their multimodal text. The inclusion of the

decorations with astronauts as well as the helmet and goggles were all important details that really added to the humoristic nature of the text.

By and large, I believe all comic strips were at the same level of understanding. All groups understood the impact that such an abrupt change of environment may cause on a person and depicted it comically in line with the panels they had analysed before, which is related to critical thinking skills; they also were efficient encoders of meaning in terms of visual literacy, as they used visual elements to convey humour and meaning, in general, and attempted to use genuine language. It is important to mention; however, that students evidently focused on the visual features of the comic strip to the detriment of verbal text of the comic strip. This is obviously a problem, considering that in an English lesson, language should be at the core of all activities. Nevertheless, I do believe students' degree of understanding was extended abstract, although there is much room for improvement.

#### **5.4.3. Activity 2.3.**

In terms of the design of the illustration, students were successful at conveying meaning, including details that were of paramount importance to the message of the text. These details include the use of a headset, as the technological device; the design of appropriate locations; and the fact that students used the military man's point of view in the second panel in order to depict a Virtual Reality. The only mode which students did not explore was the gestural mode, considering that in all panels these characters do not change their facial expressions or use many gestures. I draw on Jacob's (2013) ideas on visual literacy who claims that gestures and facial expressions are very important components of meaning-making and being able to convey a message through the use of this non-verbal communication is also related to visual literacy. However, I do believe that this group of students were able to use visual symbols to transmit a message efficiently and, for this reason, their improvement in terms of visual literacy was apparent.

With regard to the writing of speech, Group 1 attempted to use appropriate language that was related to the topic of Virtual Realities while also ensuring that the utterances were genuine. It is still clear that this group of students focuses more on other

modes of meaning rather than the verbal one, judging by the improper use of punctuation or lack thereof. However, there was significant improvement as students followed my advice and tried employing more genuine language and took risks by going beyond the parameters of their comfort zone. Naturally, this led to some errors; however, as mentioned before, we should focus on fluency over accuracy and employ “strategies necessary to comprehend and produce written language for communicative purposes” (Purcell-Gates et al, 2004); therefore, considering how students were able to convey a message successfully, it is important that students tried using more genuine vocabulary and it shows that they put a lot of effort into their work. In fact, in the use of genuine language, Group 1 used expressions such as “Let’s try” and exclamations. For this reason, I believe there was a more efficient use of their print literacy skills.

In terms of the creation of content, students were able to understand the benefits of Virtual Reality technology in society and depict a situation in which its use would be important, namely in the military. Although this text does not depict a very complex representation of the societal impact of this type of technology and the message is straightforward and simple, it is still relevant and realistic. Moreover, students used information that they had acquired during the lesson in their content, which, as mentioned in section 2.2.2, shows that students used their critical literacy skills efficiently.

Finally, I believe that these group of students were able to use their multiliterate skills in an interrelated manner as all modes of meaning-making work together to convey a message and are connected to a whole in a coherent way. For this reason, I believe the level of understanding of these students are at an extended abstract level.

In the case of Group 2, when designing of the illustration, students were also able to convey meaning efficiently. Some of the greatest strengths of their work are related to their ability to be resourceful. For instance, the goggles were not included in the list of objects provided in the website, but the group found a way to create a headset that they wanted to incorporate in the story. They also paid attention to detail when it came to the gestural mode of meaning-making, including different facial expressions, gestures and poses, so as to depict the character’s emotions, which brings us back to Jacob’s (2013) views on visual literacy. Moreover, the use of a different type of character as the virtual customer in the comic strip was also a smart addition to show that this character is not

real but a product of the technology.

For the writing of speech, students employed relevant vocabulary, which they had worked on during the lesson, and genuine language. The character expressed emotions, exclaimed and showed discontent realistically through the language while maintaining a certain degree of sophistication in some of the terms that were used.

In terms of creation of content, it was a very positive aspect that students were able to depict both the advantages and the disadvantages of virtual reality by showing us how this type of technology might be used for training, which may help unexperienced professionals not make serious mistakes with real people, while also pointing out that Virtual Reality technology has flaws, such as problems with latency.

Finally, I believe that they are at an extended abstract level, considering how all modes of meaning-making are connected to a whole and there was an effective use of all types of literacies.

Moving on to the comic strip created by Group 3. When it comes to the design of the illustration, I believe it may be difficult to understand that the comic strip is related to the topic of Virtual Reality, if it were not for the utterances of the characters. There is not visual indication that technology is being used in order to create a virtual situation. Moreover, the group did not really pay much attention to the gestural mode of meaning-making. However, they are still able to convey a message using a visual presentation.

Contrary to most groups, Group 3 prioritizes the verbal mode. The language used by this group of students is the most sophisticated and the text is of considerable length. Students employ genuine language which make the verbal exchanges displayed sound realistic and meaningful, such as interjections, the omission of the auxiliary “do” in questions and the expression of feelings. However, the language used is still complex, considering their level of English, there is an active effort to use as much vocabulary about the topic of virtual reality technology as possible.

In terms of content, students also showed awareness of the societal benefits of this kind of technology, depicting characters who intend to overcome phobias or gain experience which are of value to the career they intend to pursue. This awareness shows great critical literacy skills as students were able to apply information in their own content and produce their own discourse (Hirvela, 1996) as well as understand the social impact

of this type of technology and how it can be used to create change (Freire, 2005).

#### **5.4.4. Questionnaires**

I will now proceed with the results of the questionnaires employed in the second cycle (Appendix 7) and attempt to establish connections between the perceptions of the students and the assessment of their work.

In item A, students were asked whether they thought group work had facilitated the activities. 56,5% agreed completely, 21,7% partially agreed, 8,7% felt indifferent, 8,7% partially disagreed and 4,3% disagreed completely. These results corroborate the fact that students find it useful to partake in activities which require collaboration and the negotiation of meaning with their classmates with more than half of the students claiming that group work helps them perform the tasks.

Item B was related to visual literacy. Students were asked whether they thought the illustration of the comic strips had helped them convey messages more efficiently. 39,1% partially agreed, 26,1% agreed completely, 13% felt indifferent, 13% percent partially disagreed and 8,7% disagreed completely. The results of this item were some of the most positive in this questionnaire, which I believe to be in line with my assessment of their work. I believe that through the interpretation and design of the illustrations, students became increasingly aware of all visual modes of meaning-making, considering gestural and spatial components as well as learning how to use visuals as analogies and symbols and to create humour. This was particularly evident in the cases of Group 2 and 3, as we can see that they become more aware of the affordances of the visual presentation to convey meaning (Heinich et al., 2002).

Item D referred to print literacies. Students were asked whether they agreed that the colloquial language used in comic strips helped them interiorize genuine language that they can use in real life situations. 34,8% partially agreed, 26,1% felt indifferent, 21,7% agreed completely, 8,7% partially disagreed and the last 8,7% disagreed completely. The results are positive as well but students' opinions varied more significantly. I believe students struggled a bit more when it came to the verbal components of the comic strips and it was clear that, especially Groups 1 and 2, were more focused on the visual presentation rather than the text, especially in activity 2.2.

where they were not really given the opportunity to use much of the language they had worked on during the lesson. However, in activity 2.3, results improved significantly and, through the writing of speech, students were able to develop “abilities and strategies necessary to comprehend and produce written language for communicative purposes” (Purcell-Gates et al), as their language became more genuine. The use of communicative linguistic techniques, such as exclamations, expression of feelings and interjections, became more common and students were able to apply the language they had worked on in context.

Item E was connected to critical literacy. This item aimed to determine whether the narrative nature of comic strips had helped students understanding the context in which the language is used in a critical manner. 43,4% partially agreed, 26,1% felt indifferent, 13% agreed completely, 13% disagreed partially and 4,3% disagreed completely. The majority agreed that comic strips were an efficient pedagogical tool to promote critical literacy. These results are congruous with the assessment of the students’ work. I believe that all activities encouraged students to apply the information they had gathered throughout the lesson in the depiction of potential real-life situations. Through the creation and analysis of content, students were able to create situations which were increasingly socially and culturally relevant as well as apply the frameworks knowledge they had acquired in their own content, thus developing their critical literacy skills, as defined by Freire (2005) and Masduqi (2006).

Item G was related to multimodal literacies. In this item, students were asked whether they perceived the articulation between visuals and text in comic strips to potentialize the use of the language. 47,8% agreed partially, 30,4% felt indifferent, 13% agreed completely and 8,7% disagreed completely. Thus, the majority believes that multimodality was beneficial to the use of language. Judging by their work, I believe this connection between visuals and text facilitated the use of language in context and it was clear that, especially Group 1, benefited from these multimodal texts and improved a great deal when it came to the use of language. Moreover, there was definitely a balance in terms of conveyance of meaning between the verbal and visual components of the comic strips, as both were equally important in the representational process. All groups definitely reached the highest degree of understanding in terms of multimodal literacies.

Item C referred to motivation. Students were asked whether they agreed that comic strips were motivating pedagogical tools. 39,1% agreed partially, 30,4% felt indifferent, 13% agreed completely, 8,7% partially disagreed and 8,7% disagreed completely. Once again, opinions are mixed. It is evident that students' preferences vary and the motivational nature of comic strips is not universal, proving that different students feel motivated by different types of activities and materials.

## **Conclusions**

The action research project described in this report was undoubtedly the product of a long and laborious process; however, it was also a gratifying and educational experience which provided me with numerous opportunities to improve and reflect on my teaching practice. I was also able to develop certain skills that are essential to a good educator, such as problem solving, reflection and needs assessment. Moreover, I improved not only as a reflective professional but also as a researcher. In fact, being able to apply theoretical perspectives and address themes which are topical and very relevant nowadays was extremely useful and an amazing learning experience, proving that a teacher's job is not only to teach but also to never stop learning and adapting to new circumstances and in order to do so, one must never stop learning and investigating. Multimodality and multiliteracies and their emergent prominence in today's educational process are very good examples of how societal development requires educational changes as well, so as to ensure that our students can function efficiently in their community and become bringers of change.

With regard to the conclusions I drew from this project, by and large, the results were positive and students became aware of how meaning is conveyed in different realms and how important it is to use multiliterate skills in order to understand the world. As mentioned by Jacobs (2013), "we are all both consumers and producers of multimodal texts, navigating the world around us in complex ways" (p. 9). In fact, the concepts of multimodality and multiliteracies are very much connected to the heterogeneous and multi-layered nature of our society and on how we are constantly surrounded by multiple modes of expression. In fact, meaning is very rarely monomodal. On the internet, in the



media, in advertisements, in our interactions with other people, even inside our heads, meaning is multimodal and comprises verbal, non-verbal, gestural, visual, aural and spatial components. Sometimes they blend, sometimes they complement each other and other times, they clash. In this context, in regard to the focused question: “Will the multimodal nature of the comic strip promote the ability to make connections between multiple literacies?”, the answer is positive. With this project students became more aware of these types of relationships between modes as their attention was drawn to the particularities of each mode, “encouraging them to reflect on the rhetorical strategies” that multimodal texts employ and thus helping them “become more critical consumers of multimodal texts” (Connors, 2013). This required them to develop multiple types of skills which they will need to use in their daily lives. For this reason, I believe it is essential to “link the different skills such as speaking, reading, and listening together, since they usually occur so in the real world” (Richards, p. 13).

Moreover, I have found that this type of project generates results, which, many times, deviate from our preconceived ideas. I was surprised to see that, according to students’ opinions, the first cycle of the action research project was more effective than the second one in terms of the development of all literacies. Although my assessment of students’ work was positive in both cycles, I have reflected on their perceptions on the effectiveness of this strategy and some ideas emerged from my reflection.

Firstly, I believe activities in the first cycle were more diverse. I approached the material in different manners and employed different types of activities that not only included output strategies, in which students were encoders of meaning, but also input strategies, where they were decoders of meaning (see section 2.2.3.). There was a balance between interpreting and creating messages. Both are equally important in the development of literacies. In fact, Jacobs (2013) claims that reading and writing multimodal texts is not only active process for creators but also “for readers who by necessity engage in the active production of meaning and who use all resources available to them based on their own familiarity with the comics medium and its inherent grammars, their histories, life experiences, and interests” (p.17). In the second cycle, there was definitely a more significant focus on creating meaning. The aim was to engage students in more autonomous activities, which promote creativity and autonomy but there

was an overemphasis on encoding messages.

Secondly, in the first cycle I was a more active participant in the activities. All tasks were carried out in class discussions and in a dialogic manner. These dialogues sometimes allowed students to work with the material in a more complex manner, especially in activities 1.1. and 1.2, where students were encouraged to draw meaning from the comic strips by discussing them with me. Once again, I draw on the views of Freire (2005) on how important it is for teachers to adopt a relationship dynamic with students which promotes dialogue and collaboration. He expands on this notion by explaining:

Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach (p.81).

For this reason, I believe establishing a relationship with students which provides them with the opportunity to negotiate meaning with the teacher leads to positive results. It is also important to mention that dialogue requires us to be willing to give students a voice because dialogue ceases to be dialogue when we not only control our utterances but also those of the people we are speaking to, hence I tried never to impose right and wrong answers and I believe that resulted in interesting and new thoughts and the development of literacy skills. That was one of the biggest strengths of this project. In fact, I do feel as if I learned from these dialogues as well and that this type of collaborative approach to teaching that regards students as “critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher” (Paulo Freire, 2005, p. 81) is enriching for everyone involved. Furthermore, it engages students in self-controlled critical thinking, even if the teacher has an active role in the activity. For this reason, the answer to the focused question: “Can the interpretation and creation of content in a comic strip develop critical literacy?” is also positive.

However, I do not wish to negate the importance of the activities employed in the second cycle. I believe they are equally relevant and they led to very positive results and to significant development in students’ abilities. The creation of comic strips provided them with heightened awareness of the ways in which different modes of expression make

meaning allowing them “to internalize the literacy skills while simultaneously attaining the mental constructs that form the content for the comic strip” (Wright & Sherman, 1999, p.68). Moreover, in the second cycle, all students were given the opportunity to contribute, whereas in the first cycle, class discussions did not include every single student. Students were also able to apply the knowledge and language they had acquired in a more self-controlled manner, thereby successfully employing critical literacy skills.

With regard to the focused question: “Can visual literacy be promoted through the analysis and design of the illustration of a comic strip?”, the results were also positive. It was evident that students showed an increasing ability to pay attention to details when it came to the visual domain of meaning-making, making use of symbolism and spatial/gestural elements to convey messages efficiently. The visual component of the comic strips piqued their interest and students were very interested in making use of all the affordances of the web-based tool to create the most humorous and engaging visuals. This leads to the next focused question: “Is the use of a web-based tool to create comics an effective tool to develop digital literacy?”. As mentioned before, students were quick to learn how to employ the digital affordances that were provided to them to create multimodal texts. The digital nature of the activities allowed them to use certain components of meaning-making that cannot be used in paper and they took advantage of that aspect. For this reason, students developed digital literacy skills through the “purposeful integration of online and offline mediating activities that both teachers and students do *with* and *through* the various technologies that foster meaningful learning” (Abrams, 2015, p.1). Although they struggled slightly at first and asked for my assistance in the use of the website, they were extremely quick to acquire the skills to utilize this tool efficiently.

Finally, the answer the focused question: “Can the reading and writing of the speech in a comic strip promote print literacy?” is also positive. It was particularly important that students became more aware of the kind of language that is used in genuine communication. They started using vocatives, exclamations, interjections and other linguistic techniques that are characteristic of verbal communication more frequently. It is also of paramount importance that they were able to apply language in context with the topic and with other types of skills, proving that “reading and writing as decontextualized

and isolable skills” (Purcell-Gates et al, 2004, p. 79). In fact, verbal language seldom operates alone in the real world. Understanding how to apply it for contextualised communicative purposes is the focus of print literacy development.

To conclude, I believe that efforts should be made in order to employ a wide range of activities when it comes to multimodal texts. If meaning is a complex multifaceted phenomenon, then activities must also be complex and multifaceted, hence the importance of multimodal literacies. Providing students with different sources of input, combining semiotic resources and allowing them to use a multi-layered level of literacy skills leads them to become better communicators as it broadens their understanding of how meaning operates. As language teachers, our aim is to teach students to be proficient communicators; therefore, multimodality and multiliteracies are essential concepts in our classrooms, especially considering the fact that, as Kress (2000) mentions, multimodality has emerged partially due to the heterogenous landscape in which we live in nowadays in the context globalization. English as a global language is also very much linked to that phenomenon, thus we must also take into consideration the cultural and sociolinguistic dimension of the language.

The way we perceive the world, the decisions we make and our experiences with those who surround us are very much intrinsically connected to the way in which we create meaning from our experiences, from our interactions and from our own mindset and feelings. Meaning is simultaneously a social phenomenon but also a deeply personal concept. For this reason, teaching our students to be aware of the power of meaning-making processes and the way they operate is fundamental. Not only does this help them function in society but it also gives them a sense of identity.

## **Limitations**

Throughout the employment of this project I was faced with a series of limitations, which I will now address.

Firstly, I believe one of the most significant limitations which I encountered in the first cycle is related to that fact that not all students were able to participate in class discussions. There was definitely a group of students that was more eager to offer their contributions while a few remained quiet. The second cycle helped fix this problem by

introducing group work, giving all students the opportunity to collaborate with each other and contributing to the activity. However, we must consider the fact that students who participated more in the first cycle went into the second cycle with better preparation, considering that they were more active participators in the performance of the tasks. In fact, Group 1 comprised a series of students who had not participated very often in the first cycle, hence the results of their work is not as positive, especially in activity 2.1. (see subchapter 5.4.1.). They were also the group which showed more significant development, therefore, it is pertinent to say that group work fixed a very relevant problem for this group of students. In fact, the vast majority of students agreed that group work had helped them perform the task when answering the questionnaire (Appendix 7).

However, although all activities in the second cycle promoted self-controlled thinking and autonomy by including tasks in which I did not play such an active role, there was definitely an overemphasis on encoding meaning and students did not have the opportunity to partake in many activities that allowed them to be interpreters rather than producers of meaning. There were activities that could have been employed, which developed the aforementioned skills and that students could perform as decoders of meaning. Moreover, a more balanced variety of activities, which provided students with the opportunity to be both interpreters and creators of meaning, could have been employed in the second cycle, similar to what happened in the first cycle.

Moreover, in activity 2.2. (see section 5.4.2.) did not provide students with the opportunity to use the language. It was difficult for students, in the context of the activity, to employ the language they had learned in the situations they chose to depict. For this reason, little attention was paid to the linguistic component in the creation of those comic strips. Concomitantly, students were using the website to create comics for the first time and were more focused on the affordances of the web-based tool with regard to the visual presentation than to the written text. Afterwards, activity 2.3. (see section 5.4.3.) achieved better results due to the context and nature of the activity, as the situations that they were asked to depict required them to use the language. Moreover, while I was instructing them to perform the task and monitoring their work, I reiterated the fact that they should use the language they had worked on during the lesson.

Finally, another problem was related to the fact that lessons which took place in

the computer rooms were sometimes difficult to manage, considering that the rooms were small and overcrowded. Managing a class with almost 30 students in a small area while they sit in groups using exciting technological tools is an arduous task, which required me to repeat instructions many times to each group. Moreover, time was also a problem at times, as students became so engrossed in the creation of the comic strips that they would lose track of time.

### **Future lines of study**

As mentioned before, this project allowed me to draw very pertinent conclusions with regard to the development of literacies through the use of multimodality. It was a challenging process which I chose to partake in, considering how complex and multifaceted a study which aims to include many types of literacy skills is. Although I have answered the focused questions of this action research, the complexity of this area of study has led me to more questions and more alternatives regarding the employment of activities and the use of comic strips and multimodal texts. With this in mind, I will suggest a list of prospective future lines of study which may be relevant:

- a) combining a wider range of activities which encourages students to be both encoders and decoders of meaning, while also including all students in the performance of the tasks;
- b) using other types of multimodal texts for the purpose of developing literacies, such as videos, and posters, as well as authentic texts such as “documents produced by corporations, universities, government departments” (Kress and Leeuwen, 2006, p. 1). Using authentic texts that students will be required to interpret to function in society will help them become citizens who are more aware of the ways in which such texts intend to persuade, inform or educate them;
- c) employing more than one type of multimodal text throughout the school year and evaluating their efficacy in the promotion of literacies so as to compare the results achieved by each one of them;
- d) giving students the opportunity to assess each other’s work in the creation of multimodal texts, thus developing their critical thinking skills in the analysis of their classmates’ work, thus providing “students with opportunities to develop a language for talking about

assessment and to consider just what it is that makes the use of multiple modes effective in their own composing processes” (Cook & Kirchoff, 2017, p.88).

- e) using comic strips for other purposes other than the promotion of literacies, such as teaching grammar in order to present the grammatical items in context and through the genuine language of comics.

These ideas aim to propose meaningful types of pedagogical approaches to multimodal texts and literacy which are pertinent to the development of this area of study and can help students use their skills in an interrelating manner, similar to how they make use of them in the real world.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Observation task provided by FLUP



#### FLUP: MEIBS: Inglês: Observation Sheet: Learning Tasks (1)

Observe a lesson in which the teacher sets a specific learning task for students.

**Type of task:** Analysing graphics and completing a text with the information gathered

**Aims:** Analysis of data with regard to languages spoken in today's world

**Major type(s) of interaction pattern(s) involved in task**

S-S closed (all learners speaking in pairs) and S-S open (individual speaking to another individual, whole class listening)

**Relevance of task to students' interests/needs**

- Raising awareness of the top languages spoken nowadays
- Developing skills related to the interpretation and reading of graphics

**How well did learners cope with the logistics of the task? Could they process the instructions? Could they perform the task as required? Were they 'comfortable' performing the task?**

Students struggled visibly while performing the task. Most were not able to finish the activities during the time they were given. Moreover, they misinterpreted the data on many occasions when checking answers. I was quite surprised at some of their errors, considering that the task did not appear to be too difficult. I noticed that the students sitting around me felt the need to check the information in the graphic more than once for each item, as if they were never really sure they were choosing the right answer. The student who was sitting beside me let out some exasperated sighs on more than one occasion and was visibly upset when one of his answers were wrong, more so than normally, which was interesting.

The fact that they were asked to perform the task in Think Pair Share activity was extremely beneficial, as the results would have probably been less satisfactory without the motivation of collaborating with a partner.

**Which language was used to negotiate/collaborate? Did they have the language needed to do the task? Were the language demands of the task in line with learner level**

Students found it particularly difficult to read numbers in English. In fact, they completed most activities while speaking in English but resorted to Portuguese when saying numbers. Similarly, when checking answers, students hesitated and took their time to read numbers. The language demands of the task were appropriate for the learners' level and extremely meaningful. In fact, the students' struggle was not related to the language in itself but on its interrelation with graphics.

adapted from Wajnryb, Ruth (1992 p. 134-5) *Classroom Observation Tasks*. Cambridge: CUP

Appendix 2: Poster used on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2017



### Appendix 3: Transcription conventions

<b>Speaker IDS</b>	
<b>Symbol</b>	<b>Significance</b>
S:	Contributions from the students
SS	Utterances assigned to more than one student
<b>Intonation</b>	
?	Words spoken with rising intonation are followed by a question mark “?”
Capital letters	If a student utters a word or phrase with particular prominence, this is written in capital letters.
<b>Pauses</b>	
<silence>	When students remain quiet after a question has been asked by the teacher
<b>Non-English Utterances</b>	
<L1>	Utterances in a students' first language (L1) are put between tags.
<b>Laughter</b>	
@	All laughter and laughter-like sounds are transcribed with the @ symbol. Utterances spoken laughingly are put between <@> tags.

Adapted from VOICE Project. 2007. VOICE Transcription Conventions [2.1]

Appendix 4: Questionnaire handed out to the students at the end of First Cycle

## Questionário

O seguinte questionário está integrado num projeto de mestrado na Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto e tem como objetivo recolher informações sobre as perceções dos/as alunos/as relativas ao uso de bandas desenhadas como recurso didático nas aulas lecionadas pela Professora Estagiária Ema Oliveira. Asseguro que será mantido o **anonimato** e a **confidencialidade** das informações recolhidas.

Assinala com X a opção que melhor reflete o teu **nível de concordância** com as seguintes afirmações utilizando a seguinte escala:

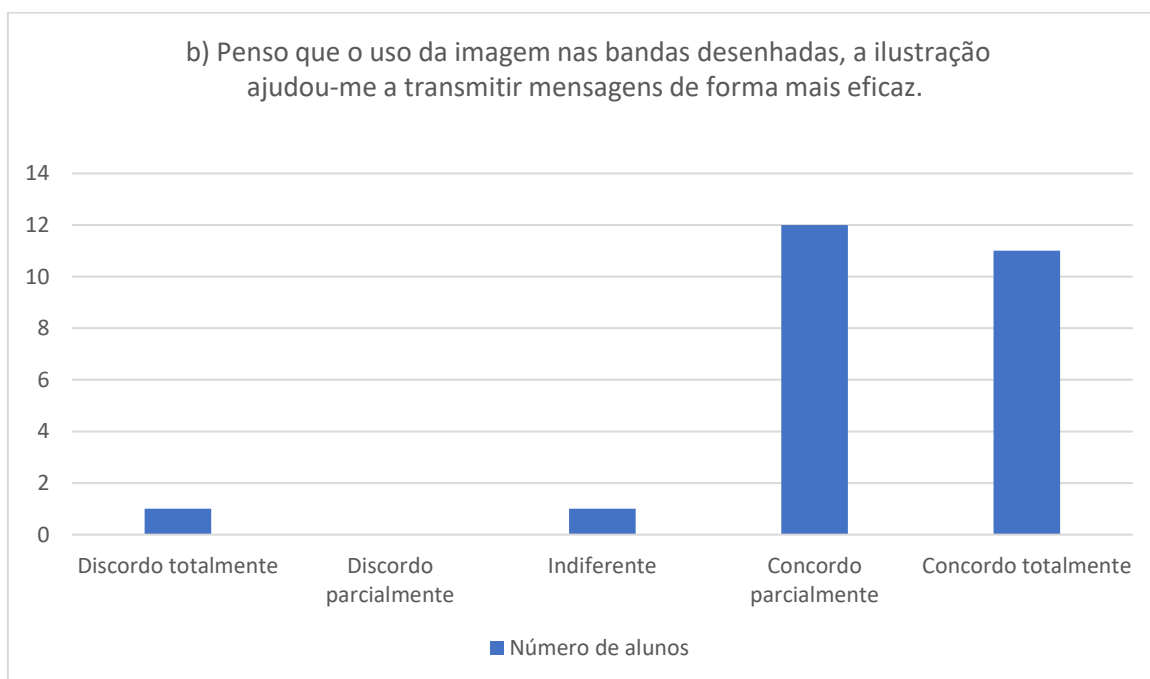
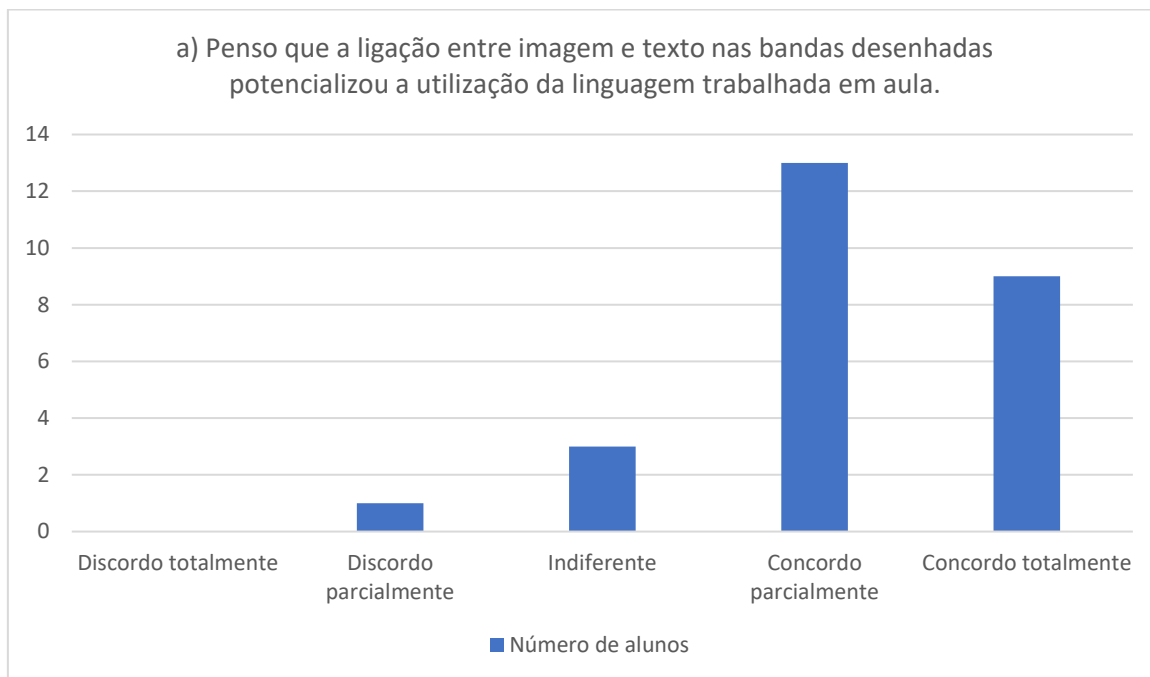
1	2	3	4	5
Discordo totalmente	Discordo parcialmente	Indiferente	Concordo parcialmente	Concordo totalmente

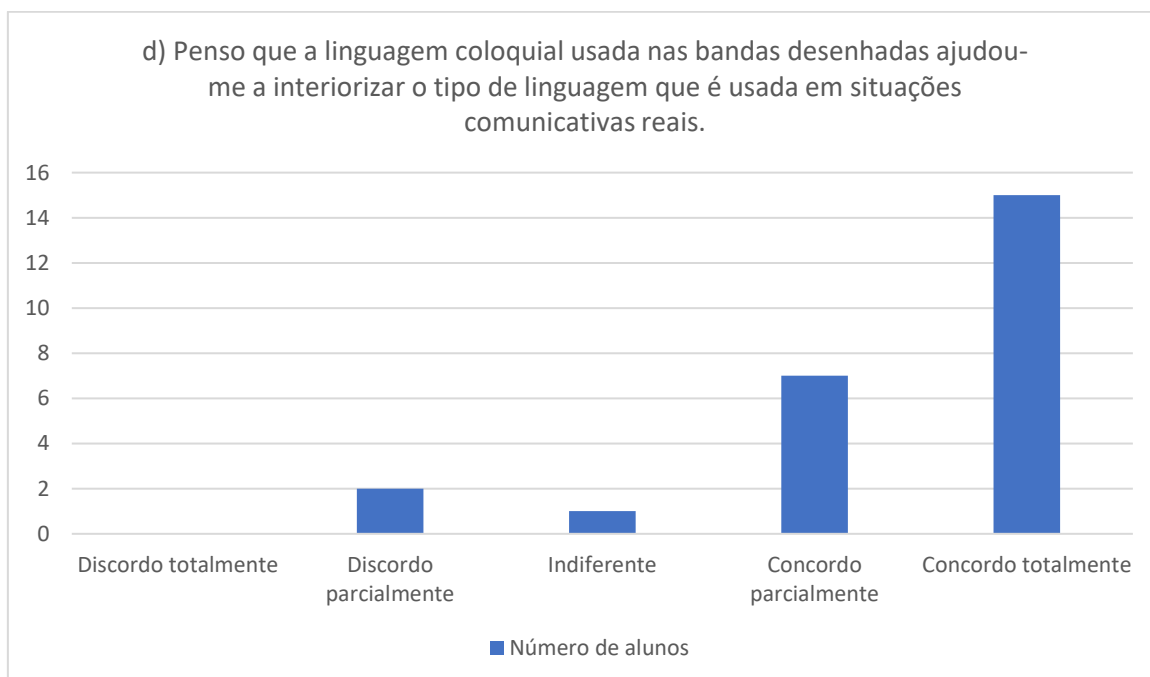
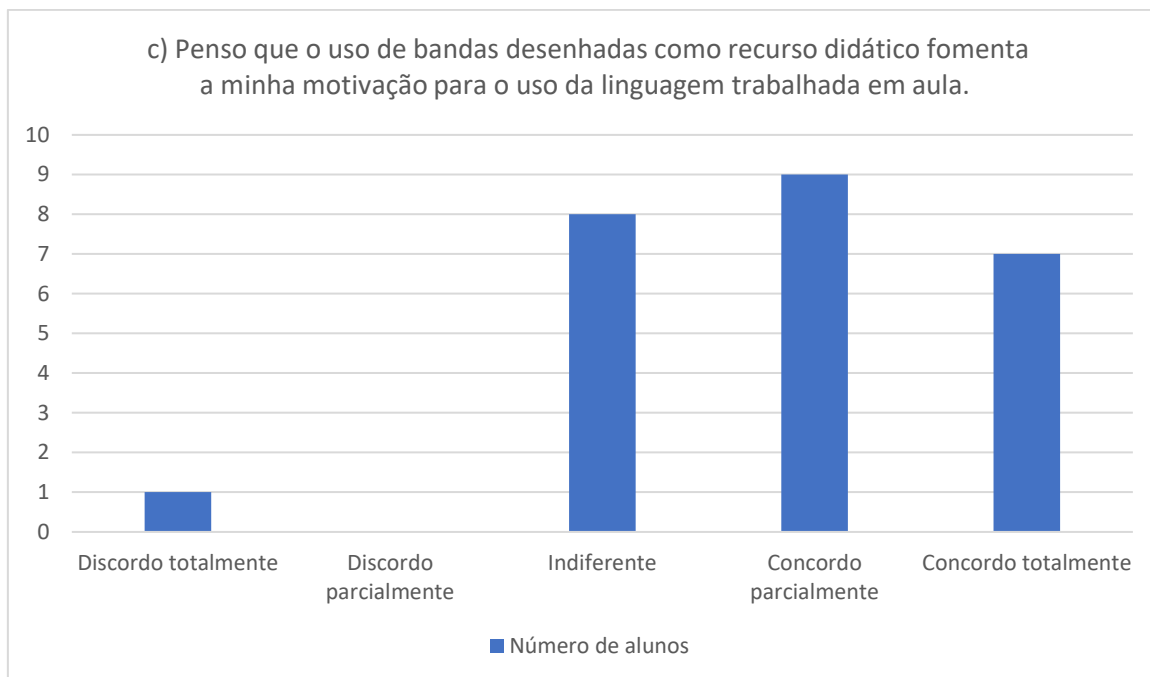
a) Penso que a ligação entre imagem e texto nas bandas desenhadas potencializou a utilização da linguagem trabalhada em aula.	1	2	3	4	5
b) Penso que o uso da imagem nas bandas desenhadas, a ilustração ajudou-me a transmitir mensagens de forma mais eficaz.	1	2	3	4	5
c) Penso que o uso de bandas desenhadas como recurso didático fomenta a minha motivação para o uso da linguagem trabalhada em aula.	1	2	3	4	5
d) Penso que a linguagem coloquial usada nas bandas desenhadas ajudou-me a interiorizar o tipo de linguagem que é usada em situações comunicativas reais.	1	2	3	4	5
e) Penso que na narração de uma história nas bandas desenhadas, compreendi de forma crítica o contexto em que a linguagem é usada.	1	2	3	4	5
f) Penso que o carácter cómico das banda desenhadas ajudou-me na memorização da linguagem que usei nas atividades.	1	2	3	4	5
g) Penso que o carácter criativo da elaboração duma banda desenhada potencializou a utilização da linguagem trabalhada na aula.	1	2	3	4	5

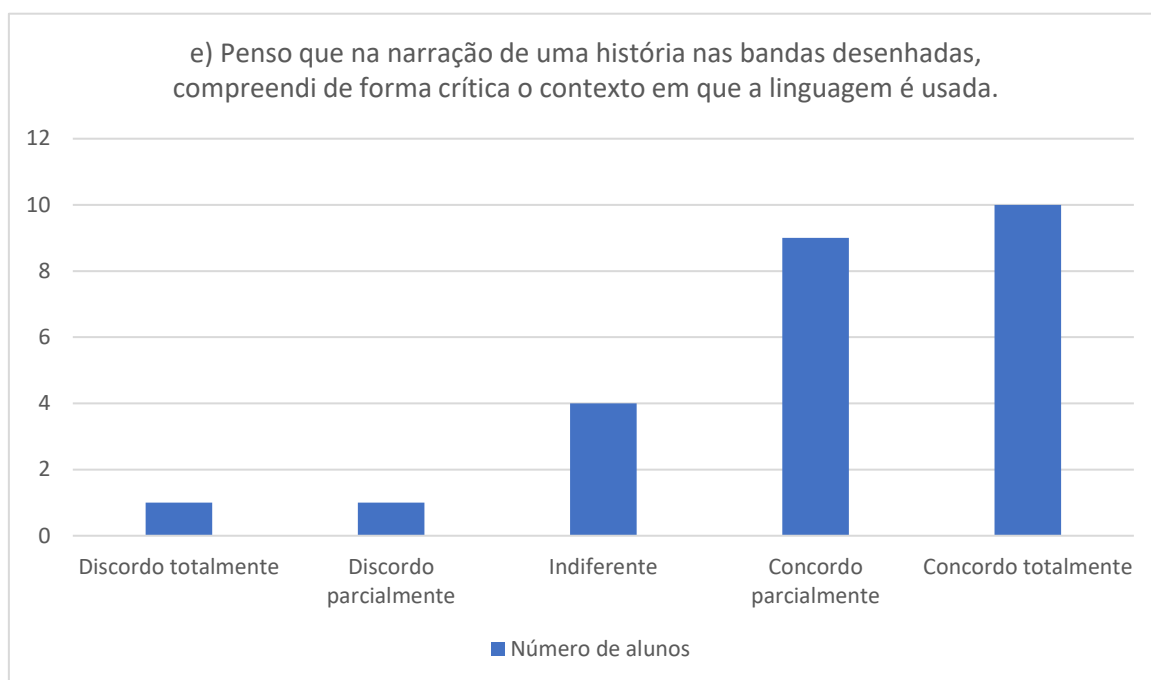
Agradeço a colaboração!



## Appendix 5: Results of the questionnaire employed in the first cycle







Appendix 6: Questionnaire handed out to the students at the end of Second Cycle

## Questionário

O seguinte questionário está integrado num projeto de mestrado na Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto e tem como objetivo recolher informações sobre as perceções dos/as alunos/as relativas ao uso de bandas desenhadas como recurso didático nas aulas lecionadas pela Professora Estagiária Ema Oliveira no **3º Período**. Asseguro que será mantido o **anonimato** e a **confidencialidade** das informações recolhidas.

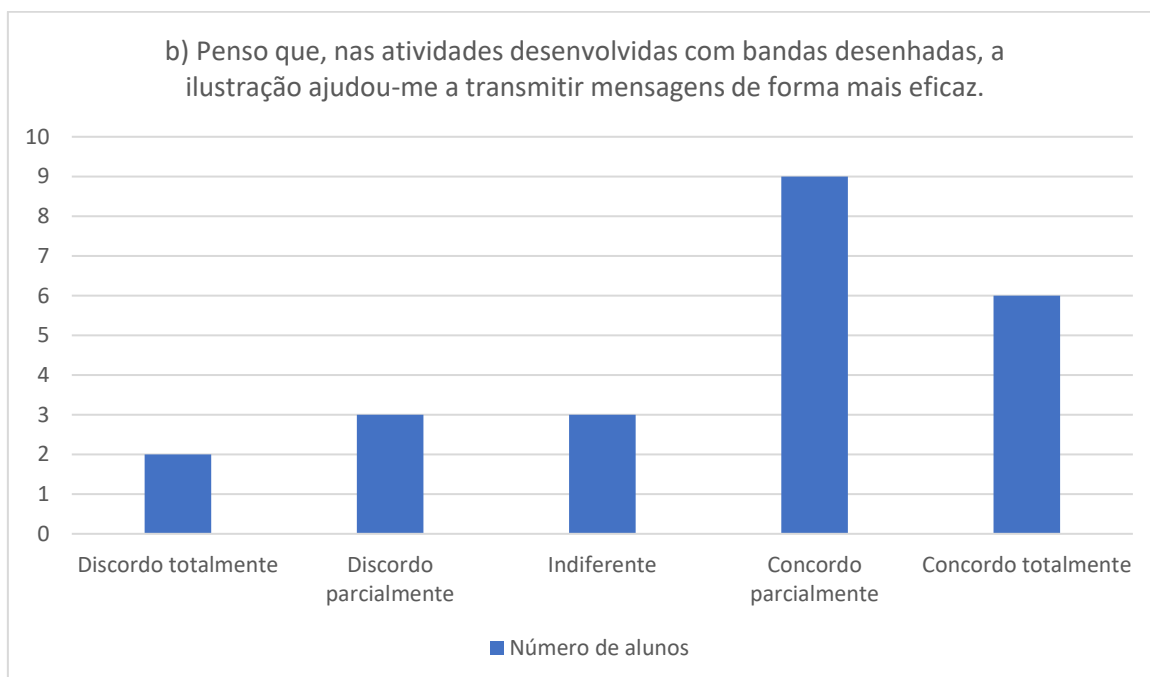
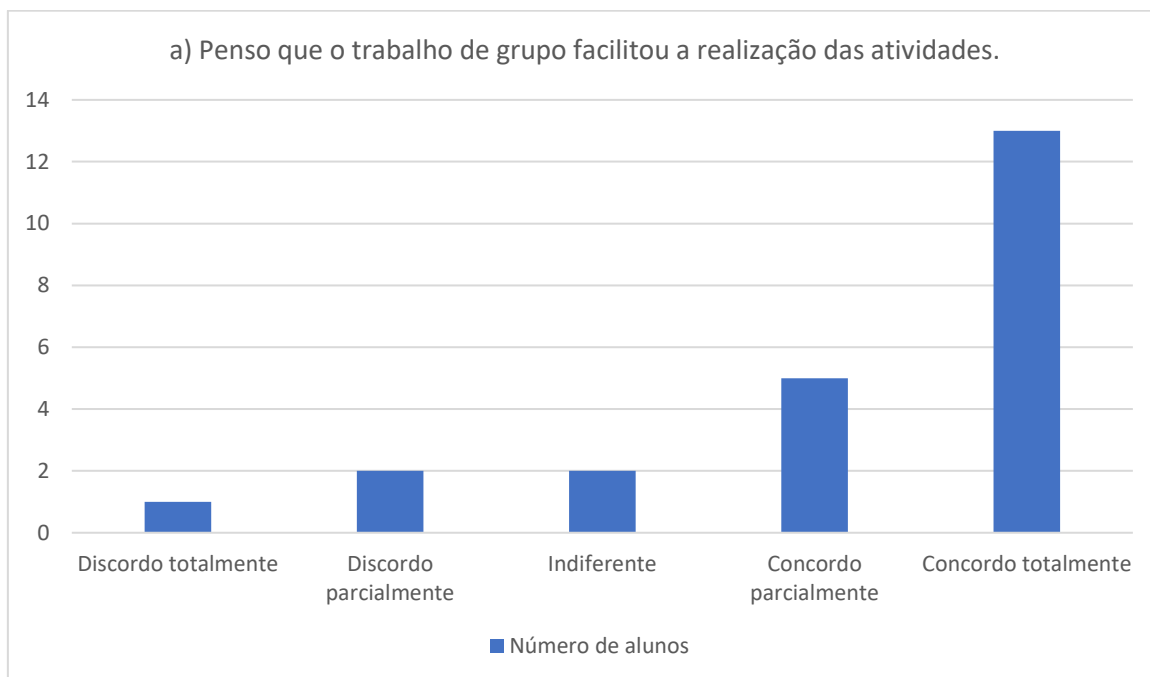
Assinala com X a opção que melhor reflete o teu **nível de concordância** com as seguintes afirmações utilizando a seguinte escala:

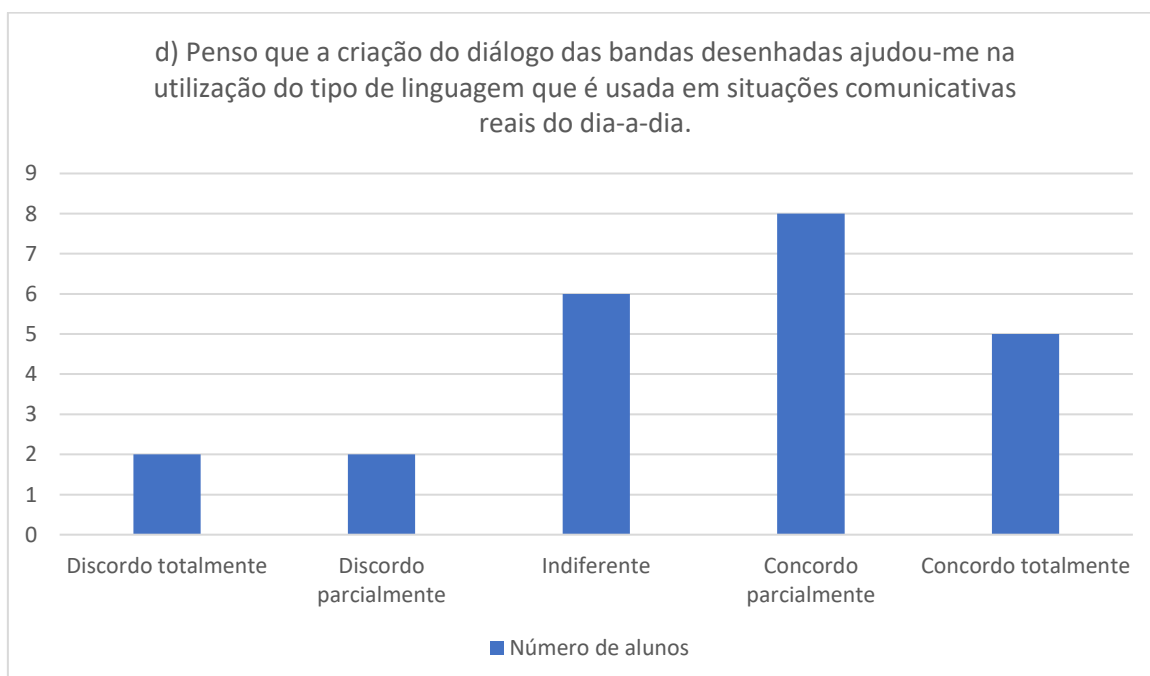
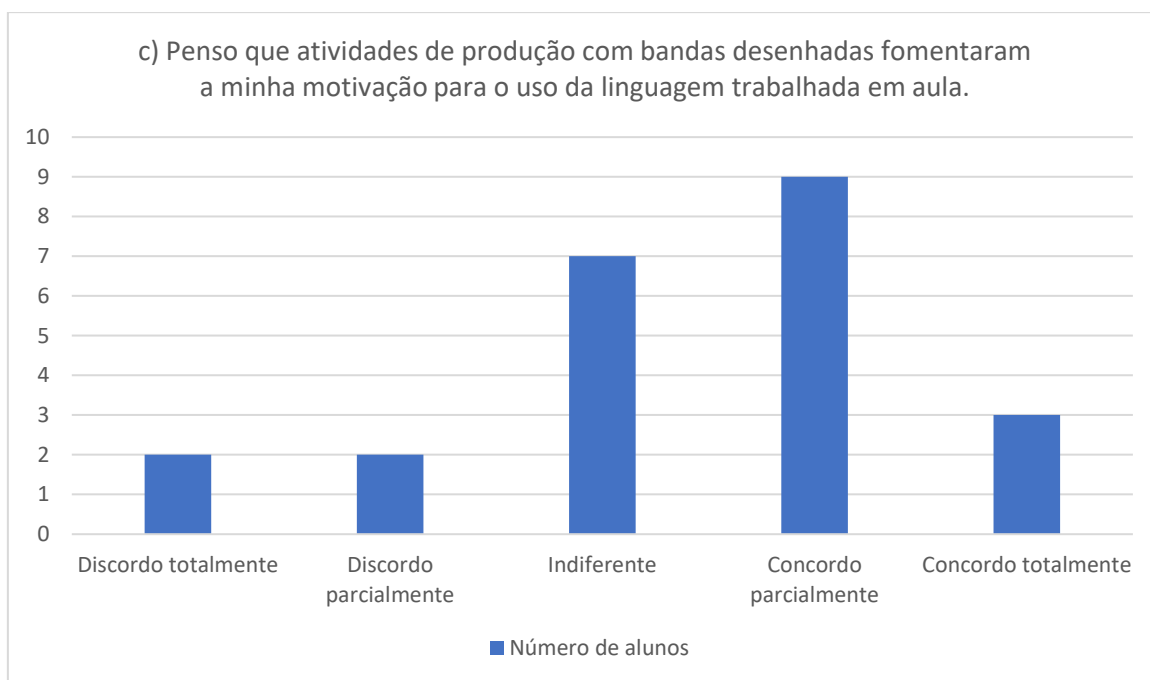
1	2	3	4	5
Discordo totalmente	Discordo parcialmente	Indiferente	Concordo parcialmente	Concordo totalmente

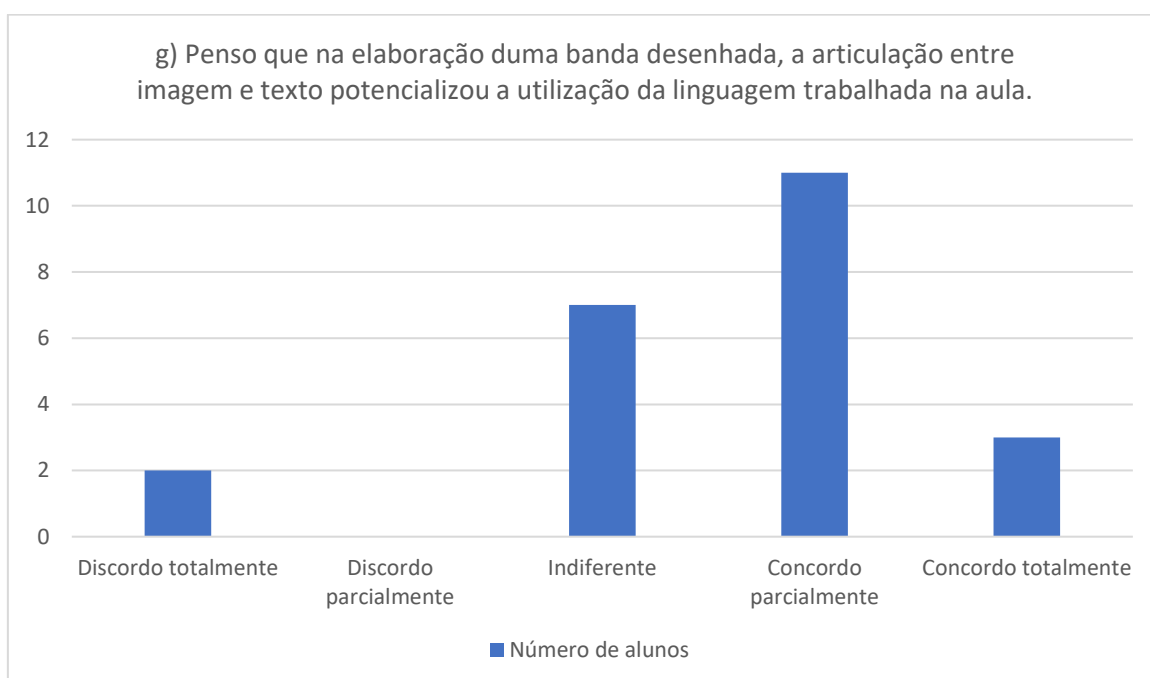
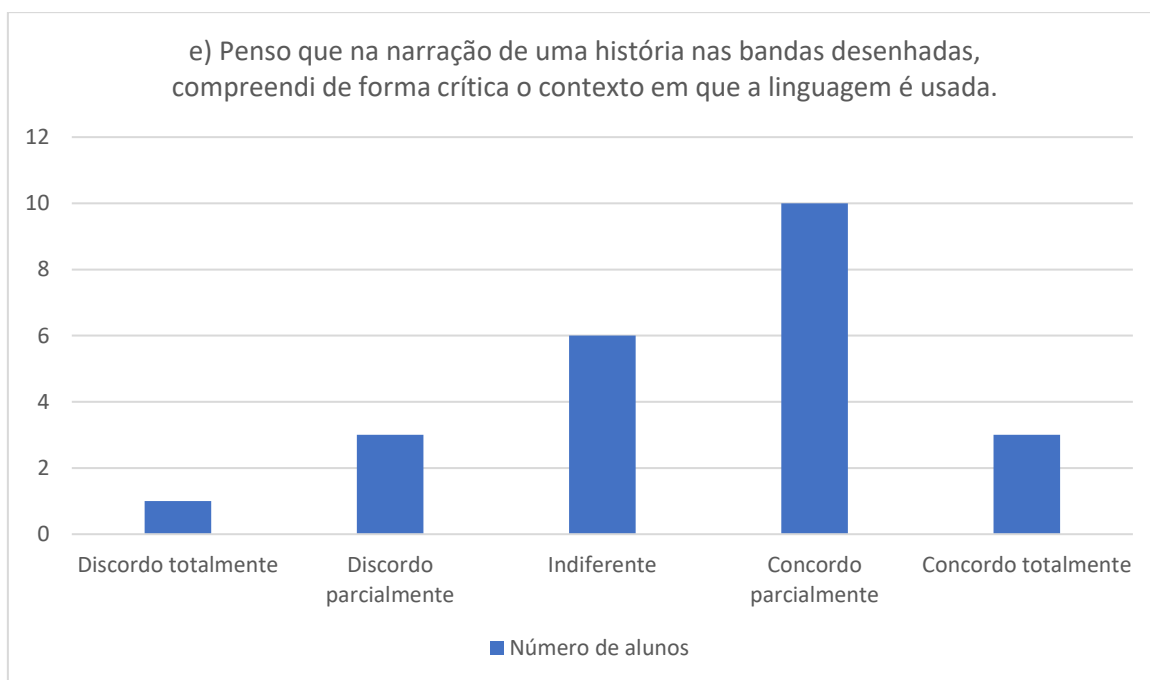
a) Penso que o trabalho de grupo facilitou a realização das atividades.	1	2	3	4	5
b) Penso que, nas atividades desenvolvidas com bandas desenhadas, a ilustração ajudou-me a transmitir mensagens de forma mais eficaz.	1	2	3	4	5
c) Penso que atividades de produção com bandas desenhadas fomentaram a minha motivação para o uso da linguagem trabalhada em aula.	1	2	3	4	5
d) Penso que a criação do diálogo das bandas desenhadas ajudou-me na utilização do tipo de linguagem que é usada em situações comunicativas reais do dia-a-dia.	1	2	3	4	5
e) Penso que na narração de uma história nas bandas desenhadas, compreendi de forma crítica o contexto em que a linguagem é usada.	1	2	3	4	5
f) Penso que o carácter cómico das bandas desenhadas ajudou-me na memorização da linguagem que usei nas atividades.	1	2	3	4	5
g) Penso que na elaboração duma banda desenhada, a articulação entre imagem e texto potencializou a utilização da linguagem trabalhada na aula.	1	2	3	4	5

Agradeço a colaboração!

Appendix 7: Results of the questionnaire employed in the second cycle.





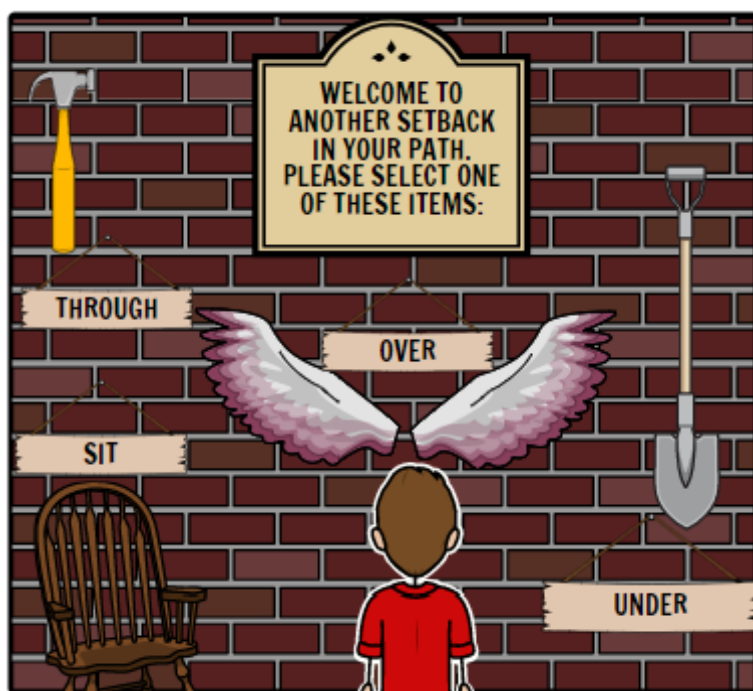


Appendix 8: Comic strip about generational gap (source: cartoonstock.com)

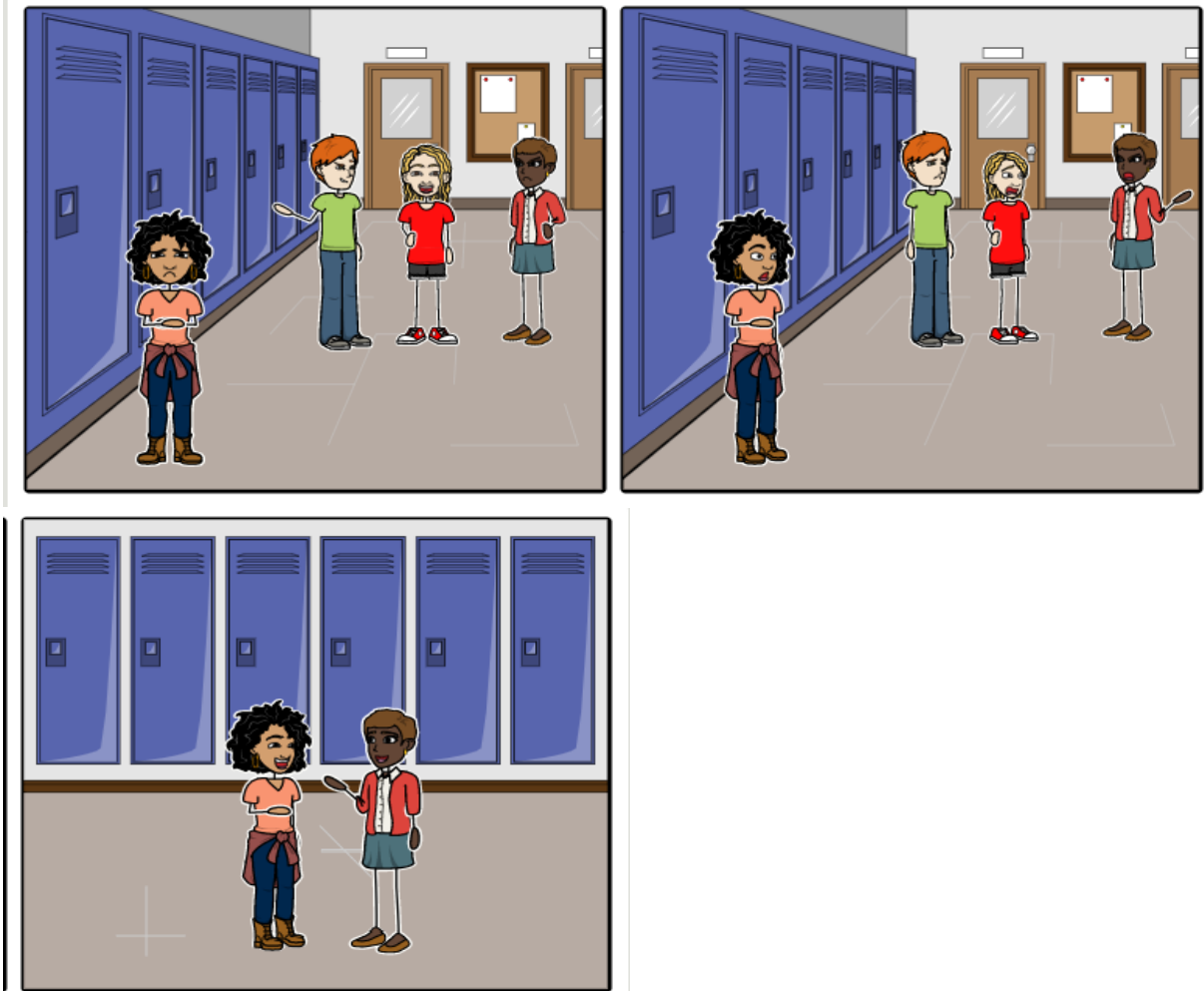




Appendix 9: Teacher-made comic strip depicting many ways in which you can overcome obstacles in life



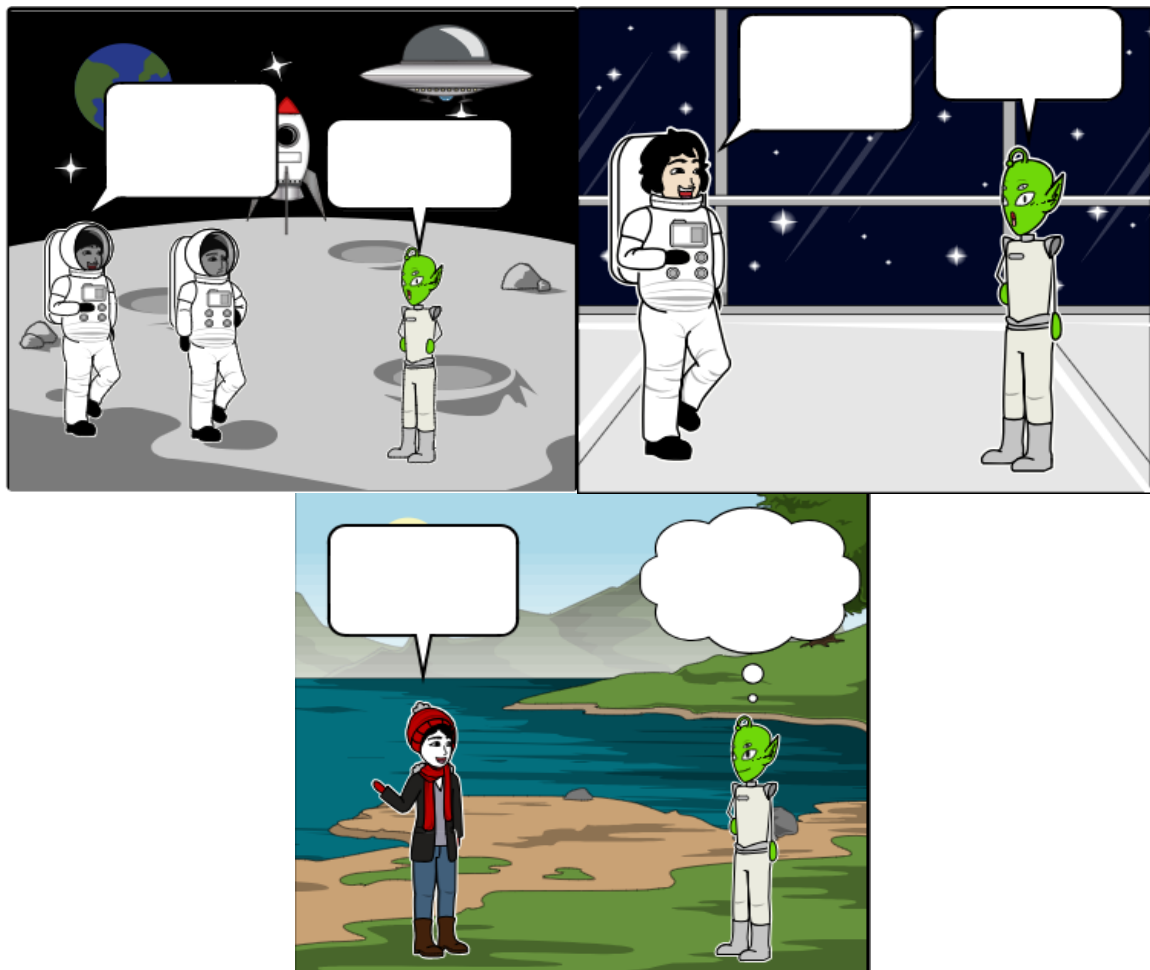
Appendix 10: Teacher-made comic strip without text about the topic of Bullying





## SPACE EXPLORATION

**This is a major breakthrough in space exploration! We've found intelligent extra-terrestrial life and an interplanetary meeting has been arranged. What will the interaction between humans and extra-terrestrials be like? Complete the speech bubbles in this Cartoon.**



Appendix 12: Teacher-made comic strip about the struggles of adapting to Earth after being stationed in Space

